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The Professional Staff and Librarian Learning Community at Rowan University

Katherine Boland

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THE PROFESSIONAL STAFF AND LIBRARIAN LEARNING COMMUNITY AT ROWAN UNIVERSITY

by

Katherine M. Boland

A Dissertation
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Doctor of Education Degree in Educational Leadership of The Graduate School at Rowan University May 5, 2011

Dissertation Chair: Burton Sisco, Ed.D.

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ABSTRACT

Katherine M. Boland
THE PROFESSIONAL STAFF AND LIBRARIAN LEARNING COMMUNITY AT ROWAN UNIVERSITY 2010/11
Burton Sisco, Ed.D.
Doctor of Education Degree in Educational Leadership

As powerful forces of change continue to exert pressure on institutions of higher education, scholars are calling for strategies to sustain our most valuable asset, the academic community. One promising response is Milton Cox’s work. He created the Miami University model for faculty and professional learning communities, a nationally-recognized strategy for supporting faculty development, addressing institutional needs, and promoting meaningful change.

This mixed methods action research project introduced a new version of Cox’s technology, a project-based learning community. This project-based version was the basis of my work with the Professional Staff and Librarian Learning Community (PSLLC). The PSLLC engaged in a collaborative, discussion-based, four-year process to design, implement, and institutionalize a new orientation program. This project also provided a context for developing my leadership practice. The data indicate that the project-based learning community was a viable strategy for promoting professional development, community building, and organizational change.
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This project would not have been possible without the guidance, support, and encouragement of many contributors.

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Dr. Cindi Hasit  Dr. Phillip Lewis  Dr. MaryBeth Walpole

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My Rowan Friends

Lori Block  Judy Holmes  Susan Murphy
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Jonathan Foglein  Mark Matalucci  Christine Tumminia
Karen Haynes  Esther Mummert  Bonnie Wilson

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

A myriad of complex challenges have thrust our system of higher education into a destabilizing period of “rapid, far-reaching, even revolutionary change” (Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006, p. 17). The rise of for-profit degree-granting institutions, the growth of online learning opportunities, the introduction of for-profit subsidiaries, the proliferation of new digital technologies, the evolution of student expectations for services, the decline in state-level appropriations, and the increase in competition for scholars and students are among the challenges contributing to the changing conditions (Bok, 2003; Boyer, 1990; Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990; Dillon, 2006; Kennedy, 1997; Kezar & Lester, 2009; Newman 2000; Newman & Couturier, 2001; Newman, Couturier & Scurry, 2004; Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006; Spitzberg & Thorndike, 1992; Zernikr, 2009). Many institutions are struggling to adjust to the new reality (Kennedy, 1997).

Rowan University is among this group. Decreasing levels of state-support have generated budget pressures. In response, the university has instituted annual increases in tuition and student fees, experimented with technology-based modes of course delivery, and re-considered its approach to funding undergraduate and graduate education (Bruder, 2006; Gurney, 2002; Tamari, 2008). In the late 2000s, President Farish recommended a change in the funding model; he proposed that the university “devote [Rowan’s] resources to our undergraduates …[and] move the great majority of our graduate
programs … to a self-supporting basis” (Farish, 2008, p. 3). This recommendation led to the current arrangement, which funds on-campus undergraduate education offered during the traditional academic year through the university’s general operating fund. All other educational services are funded through a revenue sharing model (Revenue Share Task Force, 2010). These changes prompted a number of internal reorganizations, which have been stressful for members of the Rowan community (B. Sisco, personal communication, April 14, 2011).

Scholars caution that such developments threaten our colleges’ and universities’ most valuable asset, the academic community (Bok, 2003; Kennedy, 1997; Kezar & Lester, 2009; Newman, Couturier & Scurry, 2004; Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006). They can spark frictions which may weaken community members’ allegiance to each other and to the wider community. Kezar and Lester (2009) suggest that these shifts can compound the difficulty of responding to the challenges.

The Academic Community

The academic community derives its strength from the shared belief that each member’s “individual good is intrinsically connected to the common good” (Bennett, 2003, p. 56). It plays a vital role in communicating the community’s core values and in encouraging members to practice those values by extending themselves to their fellow community members (Allan, 1997, 2005; Bennett, 1998, 2003; Boyer, 1990; Oakeshott, 1962, 2003). It helps to distinguish institutions of higher education from other types of organizations (Bennett, 1998, 2003; Kennedy, 1997).

One element of the academic community relates to the core value of altruism. The academic community translated this value into the expectation that each member of
the academic community will “give generously of [his or her] time to help [his or her] institution, colleagues, and students” (Bok, 2003, p. 114). It is practiced when a member willingly engages in activities, such as mentoring new colleagues and advising student groups, outside of the member’s primary set of interests.

Another element is the core value of service. It is translated into the expectation that each member will balance his or her own interests with those of the academic community (Bennett, 1998, 2003; Bowman, 2001; Kerr, 1994a, 1994b; Newman & Couturier, 2001). This commitment is exemplified by a member’s participation in research and scholarship activities as well as committee work and administrative projects (Boyer, 1990; Spitzberg & Thorndike, 1992).

A third element is the notion of share governance, a set of principles, and resulting practices, that guide decision making within institutions of higher education. Shared governance differs from the decision-making process in other types of organizations. It stems from a deep appreciation of “the interdependence among constituent groups at all levels of the college …[and recognizes the need for] complex coordination, excellent communication among all levels, and appropriate joint planning and execution” in the attainment of institutional goals (AFT Higher Education, n.d., p. 6). It values employee participation in decision-making and seeks to promote a sense of ownership among the members of the academic community (Setterlin & Yarrish, 2008).

Each institution develops its own interpretation of shared governance. Rowan’s tradition calls for the respectful discussion of contextual considerations, the collegial exchange of ideas, and the opportunity for impacted parties to access key data and participate in the assessment of the results of the decision-making process (University
Senate, n.d.). It encourages community members to advance the best interests of the institution.

Unfortunately, the challenges exerting pressure on the system are also altering conditions within the academic community. Members are struggling to make sense of the greater competition and the higher expectation for professional performance. They are reconsidering their commitments and reprioritizing their obligations. And some are choosing to retreat from community life (Astin, 1993; Kerr, 1994a; Kezar & Lester, 2009; Spitzberg & Thorndike, 1992).

Changes in the members’ commitments and priorities have important consequences for the individual, the other community members, and the academic community (Bok, 2003; Bennett, 1998, 2003). When an individual withdraws from the academic community, he or she forgoes opportunities to forge relationships that might combat feelings of isolation, to engage in cross-disciplinary encounters that might introduce him or her to new bodies of knowledge, and to participate in the resolution of campus-wide concerns (Kezar & Lester, 2009). The decision to withdraw from community activities also affects the individual’s colleagues. Not only do they have fewer colleagues to collaborate with in the discovery of knowledge and in the negotiation of shared meanings, they also re-consider their own choices (Astin, 1993; Bennett, 1998; Bok, 1986; Kezar & Lester, 2009; Newman, Couturier & Scurry, 2004). These colleagues may be less likely to trust others or to engage in the practices of altruism and service (Kezar & Lester, 2009; Newman, Couturier & Scurry, 2004).

The weakening of these ties impacts the entire academic community. As members chose to move further apart, they have fewer opportunities to appreciate the
interdependencies within the community, to explore areas of common ground, and to engage in the type of collaborative processes that lead to deep learning (Allan, 1998, 2005; Bennett, 1998; Oakeshott, 1962, 2003). They have few opportunities to practice the skills of collaboration and their ability to “negotiate perspective, improve interpersonal intelligence, manage one’s own emotions, facilitate meetings … reach consensus, respect others, manage conflict [and] practice active listening” may deteriorate (Kezar & Lester, 2009, p. 198).

In the short term, these losses contribute to the fragmentation and the competition within the academic community by complicating the challenge of responding to the current threats. However, in the long term, they may compromise our ability to respond to future challenges. That is, the members of the academic community may lack both the will and the skill to join “different perspectives and knowledge bases …[to reframe] problems and [discover] solutions that would not have been likely or possible from within one perspective” (Mohrman, Cohen & Morhrman, 1995, p. 8 as cited in Kezar & Lester, 2009, p. 10). Such loss would have profound implications for the future of higher education.

The Promise of Learning Communities

Over the years, many scholars have called for strategies to support and sustain the academic community. One response is learning communities. This flexible technology has been adopted by colleges and universities throughout the country to address a wide range of concerns in undergraduate and graduate education (Cox, 2004a, 2004b; Kerr, 1994b; Klein, 2002; MacGregor & Smith, 2005; Tompkins, 1992). These groups have proven to be both successful and adaptable. A sampling of the positive student learning
outcomes associated with these groups include: increased retention, increased social integration, increased academic adjustment, and increased community engagement (Cox, 2002a, 2002b; Cross, 1998; Damminger, 2004).

The successes of student learning communities have prompted researchers to apply the technology to other populations within the academic community (Cox, 2002a, 2002b). Milton Cox and his collaborators at the Miami University introduced learning communities designed to serve the needs of professionals. These groups, which share some parallels with traditional student learning communities, seem to be a promising strategy for revitalizing the academic community.

Miami University’s Model of Learning Communities.

Cox (2002a, 2004a) describes his learning community as a unique type of shared space; it is a place for a small cross-disciplinary group of colleagues to gather for a shared learning experience. Each learning community is supported by a trained facilitator, who helps the members choose a central topic, select a set of common readings, and develop individual projects related to the central topic (Cox, 2004a, 2004b). The learning community meets on a regular basis over the course of the academic year. Through these contacts, the members have opportunities to pursue personal growth and professional development (Cox, 2004a).

Cox points out that his groups, like student learning communities, can be modified to serve specific needs (Cox, 2002a, 2004b). He urges learning community advocates to consider their institution’s history with student learning community technology before initiating a learning community program for the
professional populations (Cox, 2002a, p. 28). The benefit of understanding the institution’s prior experiences with student learning community is in allowing advocates to anticipate the community’s initial reactions and to address any concerns in the earliest planning stages.

Learning Community Initiatives at Rowan University.

Rowan University’s interest in student learning communities can be traced to Boyer-inspired literature of the early 1990s (James, 1994, 1995; Okorodudu, 1995). By 1994, campus interest in these groups developed to the point that the administration organized a number of committees, taskforces, and working groups to study various aspects of the concept (Sjostrom, 1996). Within two years, the learning community had become the institution’s primary organizational model (Bianco & Monahan, 1999). The philosophical commitments underpinning this initiative were captured in the vision statement, the operational definition, and the key components of learning community model at Rowan. The vision statement reads:

[The learning community initiative will] establish and foster a community of scholars including faculty, staff, administrators, and students dedicated to the concept of an integrated learning experience. The goal of this learning community is to combine knowledge, academic rigor, and personal/social development in a nurturing environment both in and out of the classroom, in settings on- and off-campus. Its hallmark will be the interaction among its members, working in concert with a shared vision of immersion in scholarly inquiry and continuing self-development. The community shall foster a collective sense of purpose, intellectual
discipline, constructive communication, fairness, acceptance of multiple perspectives, and concern for others. Rowan shall also be a place that celebrates the effort and achievement of all members of its community. (James, 1996, p. 4)

The aspirations articulated in the vision statement were re-stated in the operational definition of the learning community at Rowan. It states:

The learning community at Rowan combines a sense of interconnectedness, knowing, and nurturing. This promotes the inter-action of all members of the Rowan College community, acting together with a shared vision. Rowan College will be a place which has a sense of purpose (mission), discipline, communication, fairness, multiple perspectives, and concern for others. Rowan College will also be a place which celebrates effort and achievement for all of the members of the community. (Sjostrom, 1996, p. 93)

These ideas were clarified and expanded in the learning community model. The model had four primary components, the first of which calls for the development of learning communities as an over-arching theme on campus. The second component calls for expansion of the concept of teaching and for recognition of the teaching and learning opportunities present in all phases of campus activity. The third component calls for the re-configuration of physical spaces on campus, including residence halls, to better support learning community activities. And the fourth component emphasizes that the intention of all of these activities was the “development of all members of the community” (James, 1996, p. 25).
First Wave.

The first wave of learning community projects occurred in the mid- and late-1990s. Some of these groups, such as cohort-based projects for undergraduate engineering students, living/studying projects for at-risk undergraduate student populations, and learning clusters for graduate students in education, focused on improving the academic experience of students (Bianco & Monahan, 1999). Others sought to integrate students’ living/learning experiences through residence-hall-based courses (Bianco & Monahan, 1999). These projects are currently ongoing, though some have been revised and expanded.

In recent years, Rowan has expanded and revised the living/learning program initiative. It now included programs for specific majors, such as art, biology, computer science, engineering, history, mathematics and Radio/TV/Film. It also includes special interest groups.

Second Wave.

The second wave occurred in the early 2000s. In response to significant changes in state-level requirements for undergraduate teacher education, the College of Education revised its conceptual framework. The new configuration positioned the learning community as the organizing concept for all of its programs (Rowan University College of Education, 2007).

The College of Education describes a learning community as:

a special kind of culture – one that values both learning and community. It is a way of thinking about the world around us, a way of relating to others in our world, a way of being. It is based on the belief that all people are not only
capable of learning important things themselves, but that everyone in the community has responsibility to help other members of the community acquire that knowledge as well. Like other groups, a learning community is comprised of individuals who share common values and have developed norms and behaviors that support those values. A learning community environment encourages everyone, children and adults alike, to develop and accept active engagement to make learning happen for all members. A learning community is a culture in which individual diversity in thinking, doing, and being is valued for the rich contributions that such diversity brings to the common good of increased learning for all. (Rowan University College of Education, 2007, pp. 1-2) This conceptual model is still in use.

The second major learning community initiative in the second wave came out of the Career and Academic Planning Center. This project, Visions of the Future Learning Community, was a revised and expanded version of Rowan’s earlier learning community program for undergraduates (Damminger, 2004). It provided a semester-long living/learning experience for freshmen who had not yet selected a major. Its features included: co-registration of students in two paired courses, housing of all students on one floor of a residence hall, regular contact with peer mentors, and monthly meetings with the program coordinator. A formative review of the outcomes of the first two cycles of the program suggested that the Visions of the Future learning community experience supported the social and academic development of the participants (Damminger, 2004). This project is currently on-going.
Third Wave.

Over the years, Rowan University has successfully experimented with different adaptations of student learning community technology. These groups have been used to achieve a wide variety of learning outcomes (Bianco & Monahan, 1999; Damminger 2004). And most of the first wave and the second wave learning community initiatives are still in service. These findings suggested that the Rowan community would be receptive to a third wave initiative.

The third wave of learning community initiatives at Rowan University was a learning community program for faculty, librarians, and professional staff. This project, the Faculty and Professional Learning Community (FPLC) program, introduced three Cox-inspired groups. Two of the learning communities organized around topics, one selected scholarship of teaching and learning and the other selected assessment. The third group, which I facilitated, was a cohort-based group.

This cohort-based group, the professional staff and librarian learning community, (PSLLC) is the focus of this dissertation. The members organized around a group project, the creation of an orientation program for our newest professional staff, librarian, and coach peers. The group engaged in a collaborative, discussion-based process to conceptualize, develop, and deliver an orientation program. The learning community experience provided opportunities for members to develop skills, build relationships, and address an institutional need.
Purpose of the Study

This study explores several aspects of PSLLC program. One aspect is the challenge of applying Cox’s (2004a, 2004b) model to other professionals in the academic community. Cox’s original created his learning communities to support faculty and this history is reflected in themes, activities, and outcomes embedded in his current model. However, the elements of the model germane to faculty do not necessarily align with the experiences of professional staff and librarians. My first research question explores the adaptation of Cox’s model for the professional staff and librarians participants of the PSLLC.

Another aspect is the PSLLC’s project, the creation of an orientation program. This project touched two distinct populations within Rowan’s academic community. The first is the group of professional staff and librarian who participated in the learning community and produced the orientation program. And my second research question explores the experiences, perceptions, and outcomes reported by these participants. The second population touched by the orientation program is the group of newly hired professional staff, librarians, and coaches who attended the orientation sessions. My third research question explores the outcomes reported by these participants.

And the final aspect of this project relates to my leadership practice in the context of the learning community initiative. My fourth research question explores my contributions to the project. More specifically, I examine the consistency between my espoused theory of leadership practice and my actual practice of leadership, as well as the lessons I learned through this experience.
Research Questions

Therefore, the research questions at the core of this action research project are:

1. How can Cox’s learning community model be adapted for professional staff and librarians?
2. What outcomes did the learning community experience produce for the members of the PSLLC?
3. What outcomes did the PSLLC’s project (the orientation program) produce for orientation program participants?
4. How did my leadership contribute to the learning community experience?

Significance of the Research

The PSLLC’s orientation program exemplified the altruism and the service I associate with the academic community. The members’ enthusiasm for the project prompted a question – could Cox’s learning community model be a strategy for supporting and revitalizing the academic community? If there is evidence of pro-community impacts (building relationships, practicing the skills of collaborations, and initiating institutional change), the project will provide support for the use of Cox’s model as an evidence-based strategy to combating the malaise in higher education. If it does not, then we will need to investigate alternative strategies.

Assumptions and Limitations

This research must be considered in light of its assumptions and limitations. Some of the assumptions that might have affected the project are: my belief that I had positive professional relationships with the participants, my belief that I had the ability to access the necessary data, my belief that supervisors and administrators supported participants’
engagement in the learning community, and my belief that this project presented opportunities for me to learn about change and leadership. Every research design has some limitations. Some of the limitations of this project are: role ambiguity (I was a participant, facilitator, and researcher), observer bias, demand characteristics, observer effects, and unidentified confounding variables (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Fowler, 1993, Mitchell & Jolley, 1992).

Definition of Important Terms

*American Federation of Teachers:* The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) is the union representing faculty, professional staff, librarians, and coaches at Rowan University. The Federation of Rowan College Educators (F.O.R.C.E.) Local 2373 is the local chapter of this organization. It is a unit of the Council of New Jersey State University Locals and is the legal agent responsible for negotiation all terms and conditions of employment with administration on behalf of its member (Council of New Jersey State College Locals, AFT, AFL-CIO, 2007).

*Coaches:* Coaches are classified as members of the professional staff. The primary responsibilities of employees in these positions involve coaching students on Rowan’s athletic teams (Council of New Jersey State College Locals, AFT, AFL-CIO, 2007).

*Faculty:* Faculty are members of the AFT bargaining unit. They are non-managerial employees whose primary responsibilities are directly tied to the instruction and research mission of the university (Council of New Jersey State College Locals, AFT, AFL-CIO, 2007). At Rowan, this includes full-time tenure track (full
professors, associate professors, and assistant professors), full-time temporary, and part-time (three-quarter time and adjunct) titles.

Faculty and Professional Learning Community (FPLC): Cox (2004b) defines a learning community as: “a cross-disciplinary faculty and staff group of six to fifteen members (eight to twelve members is the recommended size) who engage in an active, collaborative, yearlong program with a curriculum about enhancing teaching and learning and with frequent seminars and activities that provide learning, development, the scholarship of teaching, and community building” (p. 8).

Librarians: Librarians are classified as members of the faculty. The primary responsibilities of employees in these positions involve the library sciences (Council of New Jersey State College Locals, AFT, AFL-CIO, 2007).

Professional Staff: Professional staff are members of the AFT bargaining unit. They are non-managerial employees whose primary responsibilities involve “working with the faculty and students in support of the academic goals and the overall mission of the University” (Faison & Rowan, 2004, p. 27). Sample positions include: academic advisor, grant writer, mental health counselor, researcher, fund raiser, and technology support staff.

Professional Staff and Librarian Learning Community (PSLLC): A PSLLC is a small group of cross-disciplinary professional staff and librarians. The learning community creates a forum for colleagues to engage in a collaborative process of learning and community building. Through monthly face-to-face meetings and
regular email exchanges, the members of the PSLLC work together to identify a theme for their project(s), design the project(s), and implement their vision.
CHAPTER II
Espoused Theory of Leadership

Introduction

This chapter focuses on my study of leadership. It reviews my efforts to develop a theory of leadership to guide my practice in the PSSLC. The PSSLC provided a context for exploring leadership theory and applying that theory in practice. It provided opportunities for translating intentions into actions, for experimenting with action strategies, and for the members of the PSSLC to learn with and through each other (Cox, 2004a; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002; Kezar, 2002; Klenke, 1996). It also provided opportunities for critical reflection. Critical reflection is a cyclical process of acting, reflecting, observing, and applying new knowledge that several authors recommend for developing leaders (Huber, 1998; Kouzes & Posner, 2002; Senge, 1990). My hope was that these opportunities would help me discover new facets of my evolving praxis, gain new insights into my identity as a leader, and construct a robust theory of leadership.

Why Develop a Theory of Leadership?

In constructing my own leadership theory, I considered the ways a personalized theory might support my practice. I started by exploring the notion of “theory.” According to Mitchell and Jolley (1992), theory is “a set of related propositions that attempt to specify the relationship between a set of variables and some behavior” (p. 2). In other words, a theory is a constructed representation of a complex dynamic or a phenomenon that helps us make sense of the phenomenon.
There are two types of theories, expressed (articulated) theory and tacit (unarticulated) theory. An expressed theory offers certain advantages, such as language (Bell, 1997; Senge, 1990). One advantage is language; it can provide a vocabulary for exploring intentions, bringing preconscious ideas into consciousness, and critically examining thinking (Bell, 1997).

Another advantage of expressed theory is that it can serve as a framework for considering current practices and emerging problems (Bell, 1997). By proposing relationships between the elements associated with the phenomenon, it presents statements that can be tested through experimentation (Mitchell & Jolley, 1992). As the relationships are confirmed or refuted, the theory becomes a more refined and a more robust representation of the phenomenon under study. These clarifications are helpful for creating benchmarks, generating hypotheses, and building models (Argyris & Schon, 1992; Bell, 1997; Mitchell & Jolley, 1992; Senge, 1990).

These points indicate that expressed theory can be a powerful tool for understanding phenomena. By articulating my own theory of leadership, I hoped to leverage these advantages to better comprehend leadership phenomena in general. I also hoped to utilize these advantages to support my own emerging practice. With this grounding, I began to develop my own theory of leadership.

Developing My Own Leadership Theory

Engaging the Literature.

My experience with the literature on leadership supports Bass’ (1990) observation that “there are almost as many different definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept” (p. 11). Indeed, my research uncovered dozens of
competing definitions. I found that some authors define leadership in terms of the leader: 
the leader’s characteristics (traits, behaviors, personality, and charisma), the source of the leader’s influence (formal role, authority, and access to resources/power), or the focus of the leader’s activity (goal achievement, initiation of structure/management, and transformational change) (Bass, 1974, 1990; Burns, 1978, 2003; Foster, 1989). Others frame it in terms of process: group process, influence process, and political process (Bass, 1990; Burns, 2003; Foster, 1989). And some offer definitions that combine these and other factors (Bass, 1990; Burns 2003; Klenke, 1996).

As a newcomer to the field, I had difficulty relating the individual works to each other. I searched for a common core - a universal model, a common definition, or a comprehensive description of the primary roles and functions of leaders - to serve as the basis for comparing and contrasting the various threads of literature. However, I did not find these elements; according to Burns (2003), they do not yet exist.

If a comprehensive definition did not exist, perhaps I could find a schema to connect and organize the writings. I read Bass (1974, 1990), Burns (1978, 2003), and Fletcher (2002). While these authors provide useful frameworks for mapping the literature into small clusters or theories, they do not offer a comprehensive approach to organizing the vast array of works. Unsure of my next step, I returned to the literature for guidance.

Huber (1998) and Klenke (1996) offer an alternative way of working with the literature. They recommend that the emerging leader view literature as a resource, rather than the source, for his or her thinking. That is, the materials in the literature can contribute to, but need not shape, one’s understandings of leadership. Huber (1998)
develops this point; she explains that the definitions in the literature tend to influence how we talk about, describe, and make sense of a phenomenon. They set up boundaries. Sometimes the boundaries delineate differences between ideas, which can help to further our thinking, but other times they obscure possible connections among ideas, which can inhibit our thinking (Huber, 1998; Klenke, 1996). Thus, relying on the formal literature does not necessarily promote an aspiring leader’s growth.

Rather than rely on the literature for answers, Huber (1998) and Klenke (1996) both urge a new leader to draw on multiple sources of knowledge. Klenke’s (1996) point is that the leader’s own ideas should serve as the basis of his or her practice. Huber (1998) concurs; she suggests that the leader identify the key dimensions in his or her notion of leadership and then seek out related insights from the literature. In other words, the formal definitions can serve as supplemental material in the creation of the leader’s “own intuitive definition of leadership” (Huber, 1998, p. 20).

Adopting a Process for Developing My Theory.

Based on the suggestions of Huber (1998) and Klenke (1996), I devised a plan. First, I reflected on my early experiences with leadership in order to identify key themes and commitments. Then, I researched the formal theories that complemented my thoughts on leadership. I grouped these materials within an organizing framework and developed a visual representation of the ideas, constructs, and models that contribute to my vision.

Reflecting on Past Experiences.

When I started to think about my past experiences with leadership, I recalled situations from my family life, my schooling, and my work life. Some of the memories
were rich in detail, while others were impressions. As I recorded these memories in a journal, I noticed that they communicated a number of important lessons and have shaped my approach to leadership.

My Family Life.

I grew up in a small, close-knit community. During my childhood, it was not unusual for one person to have several connections to me and my family. Lucy is one example; she was my family’s neighbor, my brother’s third-grade teacher, my sister’s Girl Scout leader, and my father’s dental patient. I typically saw Lucy many times each week. This frequent contact allowed me to observe her in different contexts. I remember noticing how her role shifted, depending on the setting. Lucy might be the primary decision-maker in one context, one of several decision-makers in another context, and a non-decision-maker in another context. Lucy provided me with a model for moving in and out of leadership roles and for maintaining strong ties with others in the community.

My Schooling.

During my graduate studies in social work, I had an internship with a small community-based non-profit agency. This agency was committed to improving the quality of life in its neighborhood. More specifically, it focused on involving community stakeholders (such as non-profit staff, business and health care professionals, educators, and local residents) in a collaborative process of identifying and solving locally-defined problems. It embraced an inclusive philosophy, with such tenets as: the community contains the talent and the wisdom to solve its own problems, every member of the community has something to contribute to the health of the community, and the whole
community benefits when members work together to share perspectives and develop joint-strategies to address those community problems.

I was asked to participate in a community needs assessment. Our working group included an agency staff member and nine community representatives: a hospital administrator, a business owner, a minister, a university professor, a volunteer from the food bank, a volunteer from a literacy group, a single parent, a retired person, and me (a student). We met for monthly face-to-face meetings facilitated by the agency staff member. She introduced the group to the agency’s collaborative approach.

After a few meetings, I noticed a change in the way members were relating to each other. Through our conversations, we came to appreciate the diversity of our experiences within the community. We learned that each member’s comments added information and insights that contributed to our work. In time, we developed an ethos of respect that transcended age, position, educational attainment, and social status. I discovered that the agency’s group-work process really did enhance the quality of the work.

*My Working Life.*

A few years ago, I served on a cross-functional, cross-disciplinary, university-level taskforce. The taskforce was convened to recommend improvements to the university’s general education model. Essentially, the group’s task was to critically examine this component of the university’s curriculum.

Curriculum is a political issue at many institutions, including Rowan. The taskforce’s early discussions revealed that each participant had his or her own distinct perceptions of the strengths and the weaknesses of the current model. While these
tensions could have become significant obstacles to our process, the co-chairs offered the group an alternative approach to working with our differences. They adopted a particularly collegial style of interaction. They consistently approached their own differences of opinion as opportunities to better understand the other’s point of view (Bennett, 1998). They modeled collegial communication strategies, such as talking with each other and asking for more information (Isaacs, 2000). This example allowed the taskforce to engage in more productive discussions. Again, I saw how an ethos of mutual respect and accommodation can transform a group and improve the quality of its work.

Lessons Learned.

These experiences imparted the following lessons on leadership:

- People can play different roles in different contexts.
- People can be affected by the same issue in different ways.
- Every person has a unique set of impressions and experiences.
- These differences in impressions and experiences can contribute to the group’s understanding of the issue and improve the quality of the group’s work.
- Conflict is an opportunity to learn from each other, to explore the deeply held beliefs, and to reconsider one’s position.
- Conversation can be a powerful tool for clarifying issues, generating information, resolving tension, and reinforcing bonds within the group.

With these lessons in mind, I returned to the literature to research formal theories that could add to my emerging vision for my leadership practice.
Formal Leadership Theories

The following theories have made significant contributions to my understanding of leadership: distributed leadership, feminist leadership, and shared leadership.

Distributed Leadership.

The distributed perspective is a recent addition to the scholarship on leadership and leadership practice. It is a “person-plus’ perspective on human activity,” one that “shifts the unit of analysis from the individual actor or group of actors to the web of leaders, followers, and situation that give activity its form” (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004, p. 10). James Spillane (2006) writes about three foundational beliefs that define this approach. The first is a shift in the unit of analysis, from the leader to the leadership practice (Spillane, 2006; Spillane & Sherer, 2004). This means that one cannot make sense of leadership activity unless one has an appreciation for the “reciprocal interdependencies” in the practice environment (Spillane & Sherer, 2004, p. 2). The practice environment is a dynamic and interactive web of relationships that connects actors, artifacts, and their shared situation (Spillane, 2006; Spillane & Sherer, 2004).

The second foundational belief is that leadership practice results from the interactions between and among elements in the interactive web (Spillane, 2006). The idea is that every element in the web is connected to the other elements. The leadership activity is thought to be “stretched across” the practice environment, as each person’s practice affects and is affected by the other elements (Harries et al., 2007; Spillane, 2006; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004). This reciprocity creates a multiplicative dynamic. As the impact of each person’s leadership is more substantial than the sum of
his or her activities, formal role and positional power become less important (Gronn, 2002; Harris, 2005; Harris et al., 2007; Kets De Vries, 1999; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004). That is, in distributed leadership, followers cannot fall outside of the leadership activity because they are a central element of the dynamic (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004).

The third foundational belief in the distributed perspective is that leadership and context are tied. That is, the shared situation both defines and is defined through leadership practice of the members of the group (Spillane, 2006). There is a reciprocal relationship; the “material, cultural, and social [elements in an environment] enable, inform, and constrain the human activity [in that environment]” (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004, p. 10), and the group affects the structure, norms, and language in the environment (Gronn, 2002).

This tradition acknowledges that real-life challenges complicate the practice of leadership. One challenge is that the members of a group may not share the same goals. The distributed perspective posits that the critical factor is not the differences within the group, but the commonalities (Harris et al., 2007; Spillane, 2006). It emphasizes that while the members are linked by a web of connectivity, the web can accommodate different ends (Spillane, 2006).

This tradition also acknowledges that leading is a developmental process. A leader must learn the skills and develop the capabilities to carry out leadership activity. The leader can be supported if he or she makes mistakes while honing his or her leadership practice (Gronn, 2002; Spillane, 2006). Since the leadership activity is
stretched across the group, one member’s strength can complement another’s weakness (Spillane, 2006; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004).

The role of a leader, then, is to develop his or her own unique approach to leadership practice (Spillane, 2006; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004). He or she must learn when to exercise his or her influence, when to yield to a fellow-leader, and how to read the situation. He or she must also learn self-awareness, self-confidence, and humility, so that he or she can blend his or her efforts with those of others (Spillane, 2006).

Feminist Leadership.

Feminists define leadership as “a process by which members of a group are empowered to work together synergistically toward a common goal or vision that will create change, transform institutions, and thus improve quality of life” (Astin & Leland, 1991, p. 8). One foundational belief is that the familiar concepts and definitions of leadership, its processes, and its outcomes are socially constructed (Blackmore, 1989; Carroll, 1984; Kezar, 2002). Feminists argue that these definitions are limiting and that they can, and should, be re-interpreted.

Blackmore (1989) redefines leadership “as the ability to act with others to do things that could not be done by an individual alone” (p. 123). Her emphasis on acting with others has implications for the way people work together. It shifts the leadership process from a hierarchy of control and domination to a collective of cooperation and support (Blackmore, 1989). This shift changes the power dynamics (Blackmore, 1989). It recasts power as “influence.” It transforms power into a resource that is accessible to all members, is shared by all members of the group, and expands the range of outcomes.
that can be achieved by the group (Astin & Leland, 1991). Under the feminist
redefinition of leadership, the members of the group work toward both a social change
and personal change (empowerment) (Astin & Leland, 1991).

The role of a feminist leader, then, is to serve as an initiator. He or she identifies
issues of shared concern, builds a base of support for action, and develops strategies to
bring about change (Astin & Leland, 1991; Carroll, 1984). At the same time, he or she is
a facilitator. The leader creates a climate that nurtures collective participation and
encourages all members “to share equally in the work, in the privileges, in the defining
and in the dreaming of the world” (Lerner, as cited in Astin & Leland, 1991, p. 19).

Shared Leadership.

Shared leadership defines leadership as “a dynamic, interactive influence process
among individuals in work groups in which the objective is to lead one another to the
achievement of group goals. This influence process often involves peer, or lateral,
influence and at other times involves upward or downward hierarchal influence” (Conger
& Pearce, 2003, p. 286). A foundational belief in this perspective is that the demands of
leadership are so varied that the group is best served by spreading the responsibilities
across the group (Conger & Pearce, 2003; Hooker & Csikzentmihalyi, 2003; Seers,
Keller, & Wilkerson, 2003).

This thinking leads to a nonhierarchical, relationship-focused, collaborative vision
of leadership activity. The key factors in this dynamic are individual self-awareness,
fluid and multidirectional patterns of influence, and a shared commitment to learning
(Fletcher & Kaufer, 2003). That is, as a member develops as a leader, he or she becomes
more authentic, more open, and better able to respond to others. This self-awareness and
receptivity to influence means that he or she is better prepared to contribute to the group’s process (Fletcher, 2004; Fletcher & Kaufer, 2003; Hooker & Csikzentmihalyi, 2003; Seers, Keller, & Wilkerson, 2003).

When members of a group experience this type of interaction, they feel a sense of mutuality that can promote the growth of the individual, the other members, and the group (Hooker & Csikzentmihalyi, 2003). The mutuality flows from “an understanding and appreciation of each other’s capacities to lead under different conditions” (Conger & Pearce, 2003, p. 293). This means that one member can experiment with a new phase of his or her leadership secure in the knowledge that other members of the group can, and will, transition from following to leading, if the need should arise.

In this perspective, the role of the leader is to promote conditions for collaborative interaction. Working with others in a dynamic of shared leadership requires commitment and the ability to tolerate ambiguity (Hooker & Csikzentmihalyi, 2003). By remaining sensitive to the climate within the group, each leader can help the group achieve the promise of shared leadership: “mutual learning, greater shared understanding, and eventually, positive action” (Fletcher & Kaufer, 2003, p. 23).

Common Themes and Commitments.

By studying the formal theories of distributed, feminist, and shared leadership, I accessed language for identifying and developing the ideas embedded in my early experiences of leadership. I found the literatures’ discussion of the definitions of leadership, the conceptualizations of leadership practice, and the roles of the leader particularly helpful. In addition to providing language on the notion of leadership, these
readings helped to clarify the constructs and commitments that contribute to my ideal practice. These are: knowledge, sensemaking, power, and sense of belonging.

*Knowledge.*

Knowledge is a critical resource in the practice of leadership. As Hirtle (1996) explains, each person engages in a dynamic cognitive process that converts information into knowledge. That is, “knowledge is always embodied in a person, carried by a person; created, augmented, or improved by a person; applied by a person, taught and passed on by a person; used or misused by a person” (Drucker, 2001, p. 22). This means that it is mediated or created by filtering information through a person’s unique set of perceptions, experiences, and biases (Kezar, 2000). Knowledge, therefore, is neither neutral nor objective.

*Sensemaking.*

The idea of constructed knowledge aligns with Weick’s (1995) concept of sensemaking. According to Weick (1995), sensemaking is a cognitive process for translating stimuli into “sensible, sensible events” (p. 4). It involves both interpretative and creative functions, which explains how the same information can result in many different conclusions (Weick, 2001).

Several authors suggest that groups engage in sensemaking processes as they blend each person’s unique perspective with the other perspectives in the group (Blackmore, 1996; Senge, 1990; Weick, 2001). That is, as their discussions continue, the group condenses individual contributions into a set of shared meanings and creates a rich vocabulary of understandings. These elements become the specialized knowledge-base that informs the group’s work (Blackmore, 1996; Senge, 1990; Weick, 2001).
Power.

Power, the force and the energy in social interactions, is a significant dimension of leadership practice (Bass, 1990). The notion of power over, which is characterized by domination and control, can be differentiated from the notion of power with, which is characterized by collaboration and mutuality (Fletcher, 2004; Leithwood, 1992). The power with perspective assumes that power is an infinite resource (Astin & Leland, 1991; Kreisberg, 1992). It suggests that power can be shared in ways that are mutually beneficial for all leaders (emerging and established) (Kreisberg, 1992). That is, a leader can choose to exercise his or her influence in ways that strengthen others. He or she can engage in interpersonal acts, such as talking, listening, suggesting, and exchanging ideas, that support and empower others (Burns, 1978; Jaworski, 1998; Kreisberg, 1992).

Sense of Belonging.

Affect, including sense of community and feeling of belonging, plays a critical role in the practice of leadership. Scholars describe this aspect of group process with different terms. McMillan and Chavis (1986), for example, define sense of community as “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (p. 9). They focus on membership, influence, integration, fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The Carnegie Foundation (1990) describes community as shared goals, caring, and respect within a group. Bollen and Hoyle (1990) discuss perceived cohesion in terms of belonging and morale, while Lee and Robbins (2000) define social connectedness in terms of companionship, affiliation, and connectedness to a group.
There are meaningful commonalities among these constructs. Sense of community, perceived cohesion, and social connectedness share an emphasis on the subjective perception of belonging, membership, and connection. These terms address one’s sense of the relationships between and among individuals in a group, and the feeling that one is accepted by the group.

In my experience, feeling a personal connection to the group can be especially important during moments of conflict. While conflict can be unsettling, several authors discuss its value to a group. Marris (1974) explains that when people are confronted with change, they need the opportunity to react to it. The process of articulating one’s ambivalent feelings and working out one’s own sense of meaning can result in conflict (Marris, 1974). Palmer (1998) expands this point; he discusses the learning associated with creative conflict. These authors maintain that interpersonal relationships, and feelings of connection, can help to counterbalance the tension by sustaining the group’s focus on the pertinent issues.

Organizing Framework – Postheroic Leadership

Given the synergies between the distributed, feminist, and shared theories of leadership, I returned to the literature to look for an organizing structure that could unite these points of view. I discovered Fletcher’s (2004) model of postheroic leadership.

“[Postheroic leadership] reenvisions the ‘who’ and ‘where’ of leadership by focusing on the need to distribute the tasks and responsibilities up, down, and across the hierarchy. It reenvisions the ‘what’ of leadership by articulating leadership as a social process that occurs in and through human interactions, and it articulates the ‘how’ of leadership by focusing on the more mutual, less
hierarchical leadership practices and skills needed to engage in collaborative, collective learning…[In sum, postheroic leadership is] a paradigm shift.” (p. 650)

Characteristics of Postheroic Theories.

Fletcher’s model presents a compelling lens for studying leadership. It identifies three characteristics common to leadership theories in postheroic tradition. The first characteristic is the emphasis on leadership as a collaborative activity, something that can, and should, be practiced by people at all levels (Fletcher, 2004). She explains that we live in a highly interdependent world, yet we are biased toward individual accomplishments (Fletcher, 2002, 2004). This bias leads us to celebrate the success of a hero-leader, when the achievement is, in fact, the result of the coordinated efforts of dozens of people. The postheroic model breaks from this tradition by celebrating the web of connections, contributions, and collaborations that make leadership possible (Fletcher, 2002, 2004).

The second characteristic in the postheroic model is the emphasis on the social component of the leadership process. Fletcher (2004) writes, leadership is “a dynamic, multidirectional, collective activity - an emergent process more than an achieved state. Human interactions are key in this concept; leadership is seen as something that occurs in and through relationships and networks of influence” (p. 649). In her view, participants overcome the barriers of position and authority to engage in a multi-directional exchange of ideas and influence. Roles become less distinct as leaders learn to complement their advocacy with inquiry and followers learn to assume greater responsibility within the group (Fletcher, 2004).
The third common characteristic in Fletcher’s model is the emphasis on group dynamics. She explains that the group can establish its own norms, including norms that create conditions to support experimentation, reciprocity, and co-creation of new knowledge. In this way, the group can establish a shared environment that promotes leadership as a means for both individual- and group-level development (Fletcher, 2004).

Issues of Gender and Power.

The tenets of the distributed, feminist, and shared leadership theories are consistent with the post-heroic treatment of these three characteristics. However, the postheroic model also integrates issues of gender and power into the leadership dynamic. Fletcher’s (2002) premise is that, in our society, appropriate work behavior has been defined in terms of “idealized masculinity rooted in heroic images of individualism” (p. 2). Under this script, postheroic traits, such as “empathy, community, vulnerability, and skills of inquiry and collaboration” (Fletcher, 2004, p. 650), are misunderstood as displays of femininity, rather than correctly understood as displays of leadership.

For a postheroic leader, especially for a female leader, this misunderstanding can be problematic. If a female leader’s workplace behavior is misperceived as an expression of femininity, it might trigger others’ unconscious associations of femininity with powerlessness (Fletcher, 2002, 2004). This association may diminish the leader’s status within the group and may limit opportunities for a power-with dynamic. Another concern is the possibility that others could misread the female leader’s behavior as an aspect of her personality. Her leadership behavior may be misunderstood as “mothering” (Fletcher, 2002, p. 3).
Discussion.

My academic studies and my work experiences have exposed me to the struggles of gender equity and gender equality, and to power issues. However, I do not recall personally experiencing these issues myself. It is possible that I chose to not remember such incidences or that I failed to recognize the roles of power and gender may have played in my experiences. Throughout this project, I attended to issues of gender and power in an effort to study the challenges Fletcher describes.

My Espoused Leadership Theory

My theory of leadership is “the personal lens through which [I] see how to behave as a leader … [it] serves as the moral and ethical compass which gives direction to [my] actions” (Huber, 1998, p. 54). It consists of a definition, four core constructs, and three theoretical approaches within the postheroic tradition (see Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1. My espoused leadership theory.
I define leadership as both an activity and a process. It is a dynamic and collaboration experience of mutual influence in pursuit of shared goals. It can be practiced with a spirit of cooperation, collegiality, and mutual-respect; with an appreciation of the complexity of each leadership context; with sensitivity to the many perspectives that impact and are impacted by the leadership activity; and with a commitment to share in the possibility and in the responsibility of collective action.

My espoused theory is built upon the values, commitments, and approaches articulated in the distributed, feminist, and shared theories in the postheroic tradition of leadership. It is shaped by four core constructs:

- **Knowledge** - In my practice, I will strive to be sensitive to and encourage exploration of the different knowledge bases within the learning community.

- **Sensemaking** - In my practice, I will strive to encourage group discussion and promote the negotiation of shared meanings. I will encourage the members of the learning community to contribute and to respond to each other’s contributions.

- **Power With** - In my practice, I will work toward a power with approach. I will attend to issues of power and influence within the learning community and will strive to share power with my learning community peers.

- **Sense of Belonging** - In my practice, I will strive to promote connection and cohesion within the learning community by incorporating community building strategies into our process.
As I moved through my research project, I continually compared my espoused theory with my actual practice. These comparisons allowed me to critically evaluate the utility of my theory and make refinements to enhance my practice.

Challenges

It is important to note that my theory is a provisional expression of my cumulative knowledge and experience to date (Argyris & Schon, 1992; Huber, 1998; Klenke, 1996; Kouzes & Posner, 2002). Since I believe that leadership is a journey of discovery, I expected to encounter situations that my theory did not adequately address. These situations can be interpreted as weaknesses of the theory or as opportunities to learn more about leadership (Argyris & Schon, 1992; Huber, 1998; Kouzes & Posner, 2002). I wished to maximize the opportunity for learning, so I wanted to be prepared to recognize the possibilities in these moments. I anticipated some potential challenges to my theory.

The first set of challenges relate to my maturity as a leader. Kouzes and Posner (2002) explain that as an emerging leader, I have to grow into my own style. In the early phases of my practice, I expected to copy the style of leaders I admire in order to learn the fundamentals of leadership practice. In time and with experience, I hoped to discover my own unique voice and to modify my practice to achieve greater authenticity (Kouzes & Posner, 2002).

Huber (1998) also writes about changes resulting from the leader’s development. She suggests that as I became more comfortable in my practice, I could notice the dynamics operating in the practice setting. I expected to experiment with or modify my actions to better align with the demands of the situation. As I learned to adjust my
practice, while preserving the fundamental values and beliefs of the theory, I hoped to become a more confident leader (Huber, 1998).

Argyris and Schon (1992) explain how a new piece of knowledge can transform the leader’s entire perspective. That is, I may accept new knowledge, only to find that it conflicts with other elements of my theory. This situation can generate cognitive dissonance and the resulting discomfort may prompt me to rework the elements of my leadership theory to restore the integrity of the whole (Argyris & Schon, 1992). While it may be uncomfortable, this type of change signals deep learning.

In addition to challenges relating to maturation, my theory also faced challenges related to validity. These include the dilemmas of: incongruence, inconsistency, effectiveness, value, and testability (Argyris & Schon, 1992). The dilemma of incongruence arises from difference between espoused values and actual behavior, while the dilemma of inconsistency stems from incompatibility between two more elements of a theory. The dilemma of effectiveness surfaces when behaviors and strategies fail to produce the desired result. The dilemma of values exists when one’s behavior produces an unintended and counterproductive dynamic within the group. And the dilemma of testability develops when the conditions of the environment prohibit the testing of certain elements of the theory (Mitchell & Jolley, 1992).
CHAPTER III

Review of the Literature

Introduction

This chapter presents the key concepts and constructs utilized in the design and the operation of the PSLLC. It is organized into three parts. The first part presents a literature on the academic community, its importance in higher education, and the principles that support its health. The second part introduces Cox’s work with the Miami University learning community model. This includes the origins of the model, key points in its development, its current configuration, and its potential as a strategy for meaningful change. And the third part addresses the application of Cox’s work at Rowan University. It features a discussion of the normative-re-educative theory of planned change, as well as the frameworks and theories that guided this project.

Community in Higher Education

Community plays a central role in the creation and the coordination of a learning environment. Thomas Klein (2002) explains that it is at the very core of a university. It contains the distinct values, shared purposes, enduring traditions, and meaningful relationships that define a university’s unique social character and provides the structure to support the collaborative, respectful, and thoughtful exchanges that characterize the best aspects of the educational process (Allan, 1997, 2005; Bennett, 2003, 2007; Bogue, 2002; Bowman, 2001; Kerr, 1994a; Klein, 2002; Sergiovanni, 1993). It is the “glue” the binds the people within the academic community together (Klein, 2002).
James Coleman (1988) calls this “glue” social capital. They explain that there is an intangible web of relationships within a community. The threads of this web are the obligations and the expectations generated when members exchange favors with other members of the group (Coleman, 1988; Pontes, 1998). These exchanges garner short-term gains and long-term benefits. The immediate gains are the actual outcomes of the exchanges, while the long-term benefits are the trust, the generalized reciprocity, and the good-will generated in the exchanges (Bennett, 2003; Bourdieu, 1986; Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990; Klein, 2002; Lemmel, 2001; Putnam, 1995; Wilson, 1997).

Over time, these interactions build a sense of community or membership among the participants of the exchanges by evoking “the feeling that one is part of enterprise greater than oneself,” which is a significant community resource (Bennett, 1998, p. 31). This motivates members to voluntarily extend themselves for the benefit of the common good. In addition, it inspires members to, occasionally, “push, cajole, arouse, and entice [their] colleagues [to do the same]” (Bennett, 1998, p. 31).

The State of the Academic Community

For decades, administrators, faculty, staff, and students have been concerned about the state of the academic community. In the late 1980s, The Carnegie Foundation commissioned a study on the quality of campus life. Spitzberg, Thorndike, and their research team visited campuses across the country in the late 1980s and early 1990s to meet with groups of student, faculty, and staff. The research team found that as the community members’ involvement in campus activities became “more time limited and more narrowly instrumental” (Spitzberg & Thorndike, 1992, p. 4), the sense of
connection and commonality on campus decreased. They concluded that the health of the
cademic community was in decline (Spitzberg & Thorndike, 1992).

Spitzberg and Thorndike’s (1992) work contributed to the nation-wide discussion
on the state of academy and to a special report, Campus Life: In Search of Community.
This report called for campus leaders to develop “a larger, more integrated vision of
community in higher education” (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching,
1990, p. 7). It encouraged leaders to take action to renew the academic community and
offered a set of six guiding principles to support this work (Carnegie Foundation for the
Advancement of Teaching, 1990; McDonald & Associates, 2002; Spitzberg &
Thorndike, 1992).

The Guiding Principles to Renew Academic Community.

The six guiding principles set forth in The Carnegie Foundation’s report are:

- First, a college or university is an educationally purposeful community, a
  place where faculty [staff.] and students share academic goals and work
together to strengthen teaching and learning on the campus;
- Second, a college or university is an open community, a place where freedom
  of expression is uncompromisingly protected and where civility is powerfully
affirmed;
- Third, a college or university is a just community, a place where the
  sacredness of the person is honored and where diversity is aggressively
pursued;
- Fourth, a college or university is a disciplined community, a place where
  individuals accept their obligations to the group and where well-defined
governance procedures guide behavior for the common good;

- Fifth, a college or university is a *caring* community, a place where the well-being of each member is sensitively supported and where service to others is encouraged;

- Sixth, a college or university is a *celebrative* community, one in which the heritage of the institution is remembered and where rituals affirming tradition and change are widely shared. (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990, pp. 7-8)

These principles, known as Boyer’s principles for creating campus community, have been widely disseminated (Glowacki-Dudka & Brown, 2007; McDonald & Associates, 2002). They have informed numerous university planning initiatives at Rowan University (Bianco & Monahan, 1999; James, 1994, 1995; Okorodudu, 1995; Sjostrom, 1996).

Boyer’s Principles in Practice.

Although Boyer’s principles are well known, there are few systematic assessments of these ideas in practice. William McDonald (2002) is one scholar who has contributed to this body of literature. His research team studied the Boyer-inspired learning communities developed on five university campuses (Carson-Newman College, Messiah College, Oregon State University, Pennsylvania State University at University Park, and The State University of New York at Stony Brook). These projects included a strategic planning process for a student services unit and a campus-wide dialogue on a new initiative. The research team concluded that Boyer’s principles did contribute to the
success of wide range of projects. They encouraged campus leaders to continue to experiment with new learning community initiatives (McDonald & Associates, 2002).

The Miami University Learning Community Model

One innovative application of learning community technology is found in Milton Cox’s work. Cox’s learning communities grew out of his work with faculty development programs. In the mid-1970s, Cox created an inter-disciplinary cohort-based program to develop the teaching skills of new faculty (Cox, 2004a, 2004b). This project was funded through a multi-year grant from the Lilly Endowment’s Post-Doctoral Teaching Fellows Program (Richlin & Cox, 2004). It was so well-received that Cox’s institution, Miami University, asked him to continue the project at the conclusion of the endowment period.

The Evolution of the Concept.

Through the late 1970s and early 1980s, Cox continued his faculty development program. He revised it by incorporating literature on the scholarship of teaching and by adding social activities (Cox, 2002a, 2004a, 2004b; Richlin & Cox, 2004). He also changed the name to the Alumni Teaching Scholars Program.

By the late 1980s, the Alumni Teaching Scholars Program had earned a strong reputation at Miami University and other faculty expressed interest in the concept. More specifically, mid-career faculty and senior faculty asked Cox to create programs to meet their unique needs (Cox, 2002a, 2002b). He developed two additional cohort-based initiatives (one for mid-career faculty and one senior faculty). Later, he introduced topic-based groups (such as problem-based learning, diversity, and assessment of general education) (Cox, 2002b). These groups created opportunities for rich interaction between assistant professors, associate professors, and full professors (Cox & Richlin, 2004).
Parallels with Student Learning Communities.

At the same time Cox was expanding the faculty development program at Miami University, the student learning community movement was gaining momentum in the United States. Student learning communities were first proposed in 1920s and regained popularity in the 1980s and 1990s. Universities across the country found that these groups could be used to address academic and interpersonal issues in undergraduate and graduate education (Brower & Dettinger, 1998; Laufgraben, Shapiro, & Associates, 2004; MacGregor & Smith, 2005; Shapiro & Levine, 1999).

Cox was aware of the student learning community movement and noticed the similarities between those groups and his faculty development groups (Cox, 2004a, 2004b; Sandell, Wigley, & Kovalchick, 2004). For example, both types of programs share certain features. They can be cohort-based or topic-based. They can create opportunities for multi-disciplinary study and for integrating in- and out-of-classroom experiences (Brower & Dettinger, 2004; Cox, 2004a). In addition, both types of programs are associated with certain participant outcomes. That is, participants report deeper and more integrated learning (Cox, 2004a, 2004b; Laufgraben, Shapiro, & Associates, 2004). They are more likely to be retained by the institution (Cox, 2002a, 2004a; Laufgraben, Shapiro, & Associates, 2004; Shapiro & Levine, 1999) and to make more civic contributions (Cox, 2002a; Laufgraben, Shapiro, & Associates, 2004).

In light of these parallels, Cox renamed his groups “faculty learning communities,” and later “faculty and professional learning communities [FPLCs]” (Cox, 2002b, 2004a, 2004b).
Gaining National Attention.

By the mid-1990s, Cox’s work was garnering attention from off-campus groups. His junior faculty learning community program received an award for its contribution to enhancing undergraduate teaching and learning (Cox, 2004b; Richlin & Cox, 2004). This honor led to a 1999 grant from the Ohio Board of Regents to fund the Ohio Teaching Enhancement Program (OTEP). The OTEP introduced Cox’s learning community program to other colleges and universities in Ohio (Cox, 2004a, 2004b; Hansen, Kalish, Hall, Gynn, Holly, & Madigan, 2004; Richlin & Cox, 2004). Within three years, all seven institutions participating in OTEP had developed some variation of the Miami University model (Cox, 2004a).

The success of the OTEP project attracted other funders, and in 2001, Cox received a grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE). This grant introduced Cox’s program to five institutions: Claremont Graduate University and Consortium, Kent State University, Indiana University – Purdue University Indianapolis, The Ohio State University, and the University of Notre Dame (Cox, 2004a). And in 2003, Cox won the Hesburgh Certificate of Excellence, a prestigious award for innovation in undergraduate education, awarded by Teachers Insurance and Annuity Association – College Retirement Equities Fund (TIAA-CREF) (Richlin & Cox, 2004). This honor helped to further disseminate the model.

Through grant-funded projects, presentations at the national conferences, and articles in scholarly journals, the Miami University learning community model reached a national audience (Hansen et al., 2004; Richlin & Cox, 2004; Richlin & Essington, 2004). The experiences of early adaptors suggest that it can be adapted, with great success, to
serve the needs of different populations within the academic community. It has become a nationally-recognized strategy for promoting the professional development of administrators, faculty, graduate students, librarians, and professional staff and for building community on-campus (Cox, 2002b, 2004a; Richlin & Cox, 2004).

The Current Model.

The Miami University model defines a faculty and professional learning community (FPLC) as:

a cross-disciplinary faculty and staff group of six to fifteen members (eight to twelve members is the recommended size) who engage in an active, collaborative, yearlong program with a curriculum about enhancing teaching and learning and with frequent seminars and activities that provide learning, development, the scholarship of teaching, and community building. (Cox, 2004b, p. 8)

Key Features.

A FPLC is different from other groups on campus. Unlike a university committee or a taskforce, it does not allocate resources, fulfill a charge, or report to any other group on campus (Herr, 1999). Rather, it is a forum for professional development. It exists because participants, or members, choose to come together for a shared learning experience (Cox, 2002a, 2002b; Lattuca, 2005). It is a special type of an organizational space, one where “the attainment of both learning and community is the goal rather than a happy accident” (Sandell, Wigley, & Kovalchick, 2004, p. 51).

Within this space, everyone shares responsibility for learning - their own learning, their fellow members’ learning, and the group’s learning (Cox, 2001, 2004a, 2004b). The process calls for the group to identify a central theme and to develop a common
Curriculum. At the same time, each member designs an independent, self-directed project related to the central theme (Cox, 2004a, 2004b). The group, with the support of a trained facilitator, is expected to meet on a regular basis. This model is intentionally flexible; it acknowledges that each learning community experience is a unique combination of the knowledge-bases of the members, the interpersonal dynamics within the groups, and the funds available for the program (Sandell, Wigley, & Kovalchick, 2004).

Although each group is expected to be distinct in some ways, all FPLCs share an emphasis on community. Cox has identified a set of qualities instrumental in creating a productive learning environment and building a sense of community within the group. They are:

- **Safety and Trust** - In order for participants to connect with each other, there must be a sense of safety and trust. This is especially true as participants reveal weakness in their teaching or ignorance of teaching process or literature.

- **Openness** – In an atmosphere of openness, participants can feel free to share their thoughts and feelings without fear of retribution. For example, in the Community Using Difference, participants are able to point out and discuss ways that other participants or colleagues may offend them.

- **Respect** – In order to coalesce as a learning community, members need to feel as though they are valued and respected as contributors and as people. It is important for the university to acknowledge their participation by
financially supporting the community projects and attendance at conferences.

- **Responsiveness** – Members must respond to each other, and the facilitator(s) must respond quickly to the other participants. The facilitator should welcome concerns and preferences and share these with individuals and the community.

- **Collaboration** - The importance of collaboration in consultation and group discussion on individual member’s projects is key. Achieving learning outcomes hinges on the group’s ability to work with and respond to each other. In addition to individual projects, joint projects and presentations should be welcomed.

- **Relevance** – Learning outcomes are enhanced by relating the subject matter to the participants’ teaching, course, scholarship, and life experiences. All should be encouraged to seek out and share teaching and other real-life examples that are relative to the [faculty and staff learning community’s] objectives.

- **Challenge** – Expectations for the quality of outcomes should be high, engendering a sense of progress, scholarship, and accomplishment. Sessions should include, for example, those in which individuals share syllabi and report on their individual projects.

- **Enjoyment** – Activities must include social opportunities to lighten up, bond, and should take place in invigorating environments. For example, a
retreat can take place off campus at a nearby country inn, state park, historic site, or the like.

- **Esprit de corps** - Sharing individual and community outcomes with colleagues in the academy should generate pride and loyalty. For example, when the community makes a campus-wide presentation, participants strive to provide an excellent session.

- **Empowerment** - A sense of empowerment is both a critical element and a desired outcome of participation in a learning community. In the construction of a transformative learning environment, the participants gain a new view of themselves and a new sense of confidence in their abilities. Faculty leave their year of participation with better courses and understandings of themselves and their students. Key outcomes include scholarly teaching and contributions to the scholarship of teaching.

(Cox, 2004b, Section 9)

*Similarities with Boyer’s Principles.*

Although Cox (2004a, 2004b) does not reference Boyer’s principles for creating campus community (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990), there are considerable parallels between the two authors’ vision of a healthy learning environment. For example, Boyer’s description of purpose, the shared goal of strengthening teaching and learning, is similar to Cox’s thoughts on relevance, described as the importance of link practical learning objectives to real experience; challenge, described as the importance of setting high expectations; and collaboration, described as working with and responding to
others. Their concepts of openness are remarkably similar, as are their conceptions of celebration (for Boyer) and enjoyment (for Cox). And echoes of Boyer’s notion of a just community, which recognizes the wholeness of each person, can be seen in Cox’s ideas on respect and responsiveness.

*Classification Schema.*

There is considerable variation in the amount of and type of support each institution invests in its FPLC program. To help program developers match their plans with their budgets, Cox (2004b) created a five-level classification scheme. He describes the first-level, with a program budget of $0 - $1,999 for the year, as a subcompact. In the version, each FPLC meets on campus, over brown-bag lunches. There is no monetary support for the community members’ projects and no external reward system (Cox, 2004b). In Cox’s schema, as the funding increases, so do the “perks” for community members. The second-level is the Compact/Economy model, with a budget of $2,000 - $4,999. The next two levels are called the Intermediate and the Full-Size, with budgets of $5,000 - $9,999 and $10,000 - $19,999 respectively. And the fifth- and highest-level is the Hummer model, which boasts a budget of $20,000 or more. At this level, the members may share meals, participate in off-campus activities, and attend national conferences as a group. They may receive funding for their individual projects, course reassigned time, or favorable recognition during promotion and tenure reviews (Cox, 2004b).
Cox’s Model in Practice.

While FPLCs have a long history at Miami University, they are a relatively new addition to the national learning community movement. At the present time, the literature base is primarily focused on practice wisdom; it provides considerable guidance on forming, operating, and sustaining a FPLC program (Barton & Richlin, 2004; Cox 2001, 2004a, 2004b; Shulman, Cox, & Richlin, 2004). In addition, there is some discussion of the different populations and the variety of needs this adaptable technology can serve (Beith, 2006; Glowacki-Dudka & Brown, 2007; Nugent, Reardon, Smith, Rhodes, Zander, & Carter, 2008; Richlin & Cox, 2004; Sandell, Wigley, & Kovalchick, 2004; Shulman, Cox, & Richlin, 2004). However, these works provide little information the theoretical underpinnings that informed these applications of the technology.

Beith’s (2006) study, for example, provides evidence of the adaptability of Cox’s groups. She formed a hybrid model, one that supplements face-to-face interactions with online resources. This FPLC project targeted faculty at her northeastern community college (Beith, 2006). Nugent and his colleagues (Nugent et al., 2008) studied the use of FPLCs to support efforts to incorporate technology into the teaching and learning process at a large urban research university. This project focused on faculty perceptions of the learning community experience, rather than effect of the experience on members’ professional practice (Nugent et al., 2008). The authors concluded that the core elements of the Miami University FPLC model, such as regular peer interactions, a shared topic, a collegial environment, and remuneration, contributed to the success of the project and the satisfaction of the program participants.
Glowacki-Dudka and Brown’s (2007) study of structured and unstructured FPLCs at one mid-sized Midwestern university includes reference to Boyer’s work on the concept of scholarship and Knowles’ work on the environment for learning. Unfortunately, these concepts were not developed in the discussion of the authors’ findings, but the project does contribute insight into faculty motivations for engaging in a collaborative learning experience. More specifically, the authors collected the faculty participants’ top five reasons for choosing either a structured or an unstructured learning community. They also collected the top five benefits faculty associate with each type of learning community experience (Glowacki-Dudka & Brown, 2007).

These findings support Cox’s assertion that the model can be adapted to meet the needs and the interests of a broader array of participants and can contribute to the health of the academic community (Cox, 2003; Hansen et al., 2004; Richlin & Essington, 2004).

Cox’s Model as a Strategy for Change.

Cox proposes that, in time, FPLCs can lead to individual, group, and organizational-level change (Cox, 2001, 2004a, 2004b). The ways that a FPLC might support individual- and group-level growth are evident; members actively seek out and engage in experiences that change what they know and what they do. However, the path to organizational-level change is less apparent.

Sandell, Wigley, and Kovalchick (2004) offer one possibility. They suggest that as participants work together, their “mutual perspectives and talents merge and become transformative, both for themselves and for the learning that takes place, as well as for the institution of which they are part” (Sandell, Wigley, & Kovalchick, 2004, p. 51). Van Den Bergh and Cooper (1995) offer another possibility. They suggest that the experience
of working with others in pursuit of a societal (external) change can have a profound
effect on the individual. The experience might prompt the participant to reconsider his or
her personal values, change his or her patterns of behavior, and feel a greater sense of
agency (Van Den Bergh & Cooper, 1995). This process is depicted in Figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1. Van Den Bergh & Cooper’s model of the interaction between institutional
and individual change.

The Rowan FPLC Program

Rowan University embraced the possibilities for professional development,
community building, and change associated with the FPLC technology. My collaborators
and I created the FPLC program to address the intellectual and the social conditions of
our academic community. One of the learning communities, the PSLLC, focused on the
experiences of specific segments of the professional community (professional staff and
librarians). Because Cox’s model was designed for faculty populations, some aspects of his model were not suited for the PSLLC. To better anticipate the needs of these professionals and to align the technology with their interests, I drew from the literature on normative re-educative theories of planned change. The key lessons from these works, and their contribution to the PSLLC, are discussed in the next section.

Normative Re-Educative Theories

There are a myriad of strategies for planned change. Chin and Benne (1976, 1984) developed a pioneering framework for categorizing these strategies. They identified three classes of meta-theories: the empirical-rational approach, the power-coercive approach, and the normative-re-educative approach.

The foundational belief of the normative-re-educative approach is that behavior is shaped by the individual’s commitment to normative culture (the socio-cultural norms and standards of one’s group). The point of normative-re-educative strategies, as illustrated by Lindeman’s work in adult education and in community organizing, is to support the individual in “learning to learn from ongoing experiences” (Chin & Benne, 1976, p. 37). That is, to learn how to grow one’s knowledge, so that one might act with greater purpose and intention.

Chin and Benne (1976) outline the three assumptions in this group of strategies. The first is that one’s lived experience, the sense one makes of his or her experiences, and one’s awareness of the assumptions that inform his or her sense-making are central in the change effort. The principles and practices of Cox’s FPLC are compatible with this assumption. For example, the FPLC model builds from the notion that learning ought to continue throughout one’s professional career. It creates opportunities for members to
come together around a common theme, while also pursuing a self-defined interest. Presumably, a member joins a FPLC because the theme of the learning community is related, in some way, to an aspect of his or her lived experience.

The second assumption is that the norms and the biases of the individual’s community tend to shape, and perhaps limit, his or her understanding of a situation. In order to develop greater awareness of one’s situation, the learner must become aware of his or her biases (Chin & Benne, 1976). FPLC technology can help a learner do that. It is a cross-disciplinary group composed of members operating from a variety of intellectual traditions and perspectives. This diversity suggests that members are less likely to share discipline-driven blind spots or taken-for-granted assumptions.

And the third assumption in the normative-re-educative approach is that change occurs after the learner recognizes the limitation of the current conditions, acknowledges that his or her norms and biases contribute to the current (unacceptable) situation, and chooses to release the old patterns in favor of new ones (Chin & Benne, 1976). Releasing old patterns may require alternations in the individual’s “attitudes, values, skills, and significant relationships, [as well as] changes in [one’s] knowledge, information, or intellectual rationales for action and practice” (Chin & Benne, 1976, p. 23). A FPLC can facilitate this type of change by creating an organizational space with trust and safety, nonhierarchical status, voluntary participation, reciprocal learning, and openness. It can encourage equal voice, mutual respect, authentic communication, and caring. Research suggests that these environmental qualities can provide the learner with the resources necessary for deep learning (Cox, 2004a; Cranton, 1994, 1996a, 1996b; Eisen, 2001; Wartenberg, 1990).
Within this environment, the members of FPLC can work toward higher level communication skills. One common form of communication is discussion. In discussion “different views are presented and defended” as a means for finding the “right” solution (Senge, 1990, p. 247). Another form of communication is dialogue. In dialogue, pre-conscious elements (such as attitudes, assumptions, values, and beliefs) are brought into awareness and tested (Chin & Benne, 1976; Senge, 1999). This mode of communication is characterized by the experience of “thinking together” (Senge, 1990, p. 10) and of “finding agreement, welcoming difference, ‘trying on’ other points of view, identifying the common in the contradictory, tolerating the anxiety implicit in paradox, searching for synthesis, and reframing” (Mezirow, 2000, pp. 12-13).

In summary, Cox’s FPLC model is generally compatible with the normative-re-educative approach. I selected two sets of literature within the normative re-educative tradition to guide my work with the PSLLC (see Figure 3.2). These literatures, adult education and community intervention, are discussed in the next section.

Figure 3.2. Change Model
Adult Education.

Adult education is a normative-re-educative approach to planned change. As Merriam (2001) describes, the field of adult education is “a mosaic of theories, models, sets of principles, and explanations that, combined, compose the knowledge base of adult learning” (p. 3). This description suggests the broad array of topics in the field. The element that unites this diverse set is a shared perspective on the purposes and processes of learning in adulthood.

Lindeman (1926) offers a succinct conceptualization of this perspective. He writes:

I [conceive of] adult education in terms of a new technique of learning … It represents a process by which the adult learns to become aware of and to evaluate his experiences. To do this he cannot begin by studying ‘subjects’ in the hope that someday this information will be useful. On the contrary, he begins by giving attention to situations in which he finds himself, to problems which include obstacles to his self-fulfillment. Facts and information from the different spheres of knowledge are used, not for the purposes of accumulation, but because of need to solve problems.

In this process the teacher finds a new function. He is no longer the oracle who speaks from the platform of authority, but rather a guide, the pointer-out who also participates in proportion to the vitality and relevance of his facts and experience.

In short, my conception of adult education is this: a cooperative venture in nonauthoritarian, informal learning, the chief purpose of which is to discover the
meaning of experience; a quest of the mind which digs down to the roots of the pre-conceptions which formulate our conduct; a technique of learning for adults which makes education coterminous with life and hence elevates living itself to the level of adventurous experiment. (Lindeman, 1926, as cited in Knowles, 1970, pp. 51-52).

Lindeman’s (1926) vision conveys the key attributes of the field. As he suggests, adult education reinterprets the learning dynamic. The reinterpretation starts with the concept of learning. Mezirow (1985) writes,

[learning is] the extension of one’s ability to make explicit and elaborate (spell out), contextualize (to make associations within a frame of reference), validate (to establish the truth or authenticity of an assertion) and/or to act (perform) upon some aspect of one’s engagement with the world. (p. 142)

This reinterpretation of learning is reinforced by several core principles. The first pertains to the role of the learner. According to Knowles (1970), theories of adult education propose that the learner “feels a need to learn” (p. 52). In this way, learning becomes a personal process of discovery, in which the learner masters “those things he is ready to discover at a particular phase of his personal development” (Knowles, 1970, p. 15). Thus, the learner is recast as an active agent in the learning experience (Merriam & Caffella, 1999; Yonge, 1985).

The second shift pertains to the learning environment. Theories of adult education propose an environment characterized by “mutual trust and respect, mutual helpfulness, freedom of expression, and acceptance of differences” (Knowles, 1970, p. 52). In this type of environment, other adults are viewed as peer-learners, fully capable
of engaging in a dynamic of mutual inquiry and of choosing to influence and be influenced by others (Knowles, 1970; Yonge, 1985). These experiences prepare the learner to take greater responsibly for his or her learning experience and for integrating the new knowledge with his or her existing knowledge (Cranton, 1994, 1996a, 1996b; Kezar, 2005).

In summary, the purposes and processes of the FPLC program align with the adult education perspective on learning. Both recognize that adult learners are autonomous beings choosing to participate in a learning activity. Both acknowledge that the decision to seek out learning is based on a self-determined need or interest. And to both position “others” as fellow-learners, rather than authority figures.

One well-known theory of adult education, andragogy, contributed to the design of my learning community. This theory has generated an extensive body of theoretical and practice-based literature. In the next section, I summarize the central premises and discuss how they informed my work with the PSLLC.

Andragogy.

Andragogy is an educational approach used by adults working and learning with other adults. Knowles (1980) describes it as “the art and science of helping adults to learn” (p. 43). The nuances of andragogy are more evident when it is compared with pedagogy, “the art and science of teaching children” (Knowles, 1980, p. 43). The key distinction between two approaches originates in the role of the learner. In pedagogy, the foundational assumption casts the learner in a dependent role, while in andragogy he or she is seen as an active agent moving “from dependency toward increasing self-directedness” (Knowles, 1980, p. 43). This orientation informs the other differences.
The second distinction between the two approaches focuses on the role of the experience. Pedagogy does not attach significant value to the learner’s prior experience. Andragogy, in contrast, recognizes the learner’s life experience as a reservoir or a resource for learning (Knowles, 1980; Merriam, 2001). This distinction is expanded in the third difference, perceptions of the learner’s readiness to learn. Pedagogy assumes that the learner’s needs conform to pre-set social scripts, while andragogy assumes that the learner’s needs emerge from the challenges and opportunities he or she encounters in his or her day-to-day life (Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982; Knowles, 1980).

The fourth contrast addresses the learner’s orientation toward learning. Pedagogy builds from the notion that learning is subject-centered. This means that the learner gradually develops his or her knowledge over a long time horizon, in preparation for a future application (Knowles, 1980). Andragogy can be characterized as problem-centered. It expects that the learner is interested in the immediate application of the new knowledge (Knowles, 1980; Merriam, 2001). These assumptions are echoed in the fifth distinction, motivation. While pedagogy suggests that the learner is motivated to learn by external factors, andragogy attributes motivation to internal factors (Merriam, 2001; Mezirow, 2000).

The literature on andragogy contributed to the PSLLC by helping me anticipate the needs and expectations of the members. The literature’s discussion of learning, roles, and climate are particularly relevant, given the population targeted for this program. All of the members of the PSLLC participants are college-educated professionals who have chosen a career in higher education. They have considerable experience with the traditional, pedagogical (subject-centered) approach to learning, but may not have
experience with peer-to-peer learning. Some may find it difficult to let go of their “expert” status or to ask for help (Cross, 1998; Reed, 1996). Andragogy can aid this transition by offering a language for thinking about and talking about one’s experiences in the learning community.

Community Intervention.

Another body of work within the normative-re-educative approach to planned change pertains to community intervention. It encompasses work at the “community level orientated toward improving or changing community institutions and solving community problems” (Rothman, 1974, p. 5). Though most often associated with social work, this field is an eclectic mix including public health, community mental health, adult education, and other disciplines (Rothman, 1995). Its activities range from establishing community services, to engaging in political agitation, to supporting informal helping networks (Rothman & Tropman, 1987).

Rothman (1974, 1995) created the primary framework for differentiating intervention strategies at the community level. He draws distinctions in terms of: goals, types of community problems, primary strategies and techniques, and interpretation of power dynamics (Rothman, 1974). Based on these criteria, he identified three basic approaches: social planning, social action, and locality development (Fellin, 1995; Homan, 2004; Meenaghan, Gibbons, & McNutt, 2005).

Locality development approach.

The locality development approach addresses issues pertaining to “community competency (the ability to solve problems on a self-help basis) and social integration (harmonious interrelationships among different racial, ethnic, and social-class groups –
indeed among all people)” (Rothman, 1995, p. 29). It emphasizes process goals, such as community integration, cooperative problem solving, and community building. It focuses on developing a sense of “mutuality, identity, participation, plurality, and autonomy” among people who share an environment (Rothman, 1995, p. 29). In this approach, members of the community work together to identify local concerns and to then mobilize local economic, human, political, or social resources to address those concerns (Cnaan & Rothman, 1995; Homan, 2004; McNeely, 1999; Meenaghan, Gibbons, & McNutt, 2005; Rothman & Tropman, 1987).

The purposes and processes of the PSLLC align with the locality development perspective of community change. Both recognize the power of groups and seek to build relationships that promote the sharing of information, insights, and experiences (Cox, 2002a, 2002b; Homan, 2004; Rothman, 1995). Both bring a diverse cross-section of community together (Cox 2004a, 2004b; Khinduka, 1987). And both actively reframe problems as possibilities by creating conditions to promote greater autonomy, personal responsibility, and growth.

The locality development literature also contributed a number of insights on relationships and group process. A central tenet of the FPLC technology is that the success of the learning experiences is determined, in large part, by the quality of the interactions between the participants (Cox, 2002a, 2004a, 2004b). The peer-to-peer, collaborative dynamic of the PSLLC are dissimilar to other relationships on campus and the readings on collegiality, participatory processes, and egalitarian relationships can support the group’s effort to engage in this type of exchange.
Summary of Chapter III

As discussed in Chapter I, the purpose of this project was to study the application of Cox’s learning community model as a strategy for professional development, community building, and organizational change in the context of the PSLLC. This chapter established the significance of the academic community in creating and maintaining a healthy learning environment (Allan 1997, 2005; Bennett 1998, 2003; Klein 2002). It presented a brief summary of past ideas for revitalizing the sense of community on college and university campuses (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990; Spitzberg & Thorndike, 1992;) and the contributions of the student learning community movement (McDonald & Associates, 2002). In addition, this chapter introduced the Miami University learning community model, traced its history, and outlined its key features (Cox, 2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2004a, 2004b; Richlin & Cox, 2004). It reviewed the findings from recent studies of the Miami model and outlined its potential as a strategy for planned change.

This chapter also included a review of the literature that contributed to the operation of the PSLLC. Adult education (Knowles, 1970; Merriam, 2001; Merriam & Caffella, 1999), andragogy (Knowles, 1980; Merriam, 2001), community intervention (Rothman, 1974, 1995), and locality development (Rothman, 1974, 1995; Rothman & Tropman, 1987) are all works within the normative re-educative tradition. They share a belief in the transformative potential of providing opportunities for meaningful and productive interaction and they articulate perspectives, strategies, and techniques that support this type of work. These ideas contributed to the design of the research methodology, which is discussed in Chapter IV.
CHAPTER IV
Research Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this action research project was to study the application of Cox’s learning community model as a strategy for professional development, community building, and organizational change. This aim was pursued within and through the PSLLC. The group provided a context for the investigation of four research questions:

1. How can Cox’s learning community model be adapted for professional staff and librarians?
2. What outcomes did the learning community experience produce for the members of the PSLLC?
3. What outcomes did the PSLLC’s project (the orientation program) produce for orientation program participants?
4. How did my leadership contribute to the learning community experience?

This chapter describes the research methodology selected for this study. It includes a discussion of action research methodology and its suitability for this study. It also includes an overview of the methods of data collection used, a summary of the action cycles, and a map to link the research questions to the action cycles.

The Rationale for the Research Methodology

Action research was selected as the methodology for this study because its key features complement the purposes and the process of this project. Action research is a multidimensional, systematic, and collaborative approach to producing practical knowledge and fostering meaningful change (Greenwood & Levin, 2007; Levin &
Greenwood, 2001; Reason, 2001). It is characterized by its commitments, which include: a commitment to working through a collaborative group-process, a commitment to valuing both professional and local sources of knowledge, and a commitment to studying the context-specific factors that shape the local environment (Levin & Greenwood, 2001; McTaggart, 1991; Reason & Bradbury, 2003; Shumsky, 1956). These distinct commitments shape the purpose, the process, the assignment of roles, and the assessment of knowledge within this tradition.

Purpose.

Action research starts with one goal, to understand (Burgess, 2006; Johnson, 2002; Kyle & Hovda, 1987; Levin & Greenwood, 2001; McTaggart, 1991). It pursues understanding through a group process and calls for participants to organize around a common issue. As the members of the group work together, they learn from their experiences and generate context-specific knowledge. The group draws on this knowledge as they coordinate their efforts to address a shared concern (McTaggart, 1991; Reason, 2001).

Process.

The action research process is described as emergent and participatory (Bradbury & Reason, 2001). It is defined by a series of spiraling action cycles, each consists of four recursive steps, “planning, acting, observing, and evaluating the results of the action” (McTaggart, 1991, p. 170) (see Figure 4.1).
Figure 4.1. Action research cycle.

According to Bradbury and Reason (2001), the process begins with a group’s effort to develop a shared understanding of a problematic situation. At this point, the group enters the planning step. It is marked by a shift in the content of the group’s conversation to a new emphasis on a more desirable future and identifying strategies to move in that direction (Bradbury & Reason, 2001; Reason & Bradbury, 2003).

The transition from the planning step to the acting step occurs as the group starts to implement its change strategies. When these actions produce results, the group enters the observing stage. The members utilized the quantitative methods and/or the qualitative methods most suitable for the study of the “idiosyncratic, personalized, and contextual” research questions of their project (Kyle & Hovda, 1987, p. 171). And in the fourth step, evaluating, the group analyzes the change data and re-assesses the problematic situation. As the group settles on a new understanding of the state of the problem, the members may choose to terminate the action research process or to launch another action cycle (Bradbury & Reason, 2001; Reason & Bradbury, 2003).
Role of the Researcher and the Research Participants.

This orientation toward understanding and change calls for a different type of interaction between the researcher and the research participants (Bradbury & Reason, 2001; Reason & Bradbury, 2003). The interaction must emphasize the dynamic exchange of ideas, the collegial interaction of all participants, and the collaborative construction of knowledge (Greenwood & Levin, 2007; Johnson, 2002; Kyle & Hovda; 1987; Reason & Bradbury, 2003; Shumsky, 1956). In essence, the action research approach recasts the roles and the responsibilities of both the researcher and the research participants (Bensimon et al., 2004; Reason, 2001).

To fully engage in this process, the researcher must shift from expert to partner. He or she must move away from the notion of research as a solitary endeavor and relinquish the claim of authority over the research context and the collaborating partners (Bensimon et al., 2004; Brydon-Miller et al., 2003; McTaggart, 1991; Shumsky, 1956; Schmuck, 2006). And as the researcher’s role changes, so do his or her responsibilities.

In action research, the researcher is to facilitate the group’s collaborative process (Shumsky, 1956). Brydon-Miller et al. (2003) observe that the action research process is often “messy” (p. 21); nevertheless, the action researcher must resist the urge to impose a direction on the group’s process. His or her responsibility is to support the members’ effort to remain flexible and to explore the issues within their shared context (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003).

The action research process also reinterprets the role and responsibilities of the research participants. As Senge and Scharmer (2003) explain, research participants contribute insider-perspectives and context-specific insights to the group’s work. They
share responsibility for the co-generation of knowledge (McTaggart, 1991), which moves them from a passive position, as the subjects of the research, to an active position, as “co-learners, co-researchers, and co-activists” in the process (Burgess, 2006, p. 429).

In this way, the action research process encourages members of the group to recognize the value of their own insights (Kyle & Hovda, 1987). It teaches them to construct, communicate, and evaluate knowledge (Reason, 2001; Schmuck, 2006). Through these experiences, they develop skills, gain a sense of personal empowerment, and gradually alter their shared environment (McTaggert, 1991; Reason, 2001; Shumsky, 1956).

Assessing the Quality and Validity of Knowledge.

Several authors suggest assessing the quality and validity of the knowledge generated in the action research process through triangulation (Creswell, 2003; Johnson, 2002; Schwalbach, 2003). Johnson (2002) explains that triangulation involves “collecting different types of data, using different data sources, collecting data at different times, and… having other people review your data to check for accuracy” (p. 73). It allows the researcher to compare and contrast the results of qualitative and quantitative data collection methods (Creswell, 2003). The convergence of the data from several sources leads to a richer understanding of the phenomenon and inspires confidence in the accuracy of the researcher’s conclusions (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Schwalbach, 2003).

Application to This Project.

The characteristics and the commitments of action research align with the purpose and the processes of this project. The members of the PSLLC came together, under the structure of a Cox-inspired learning community, to design and deliver an orientation
program for professional staff, librarians, and coaches. The project was an untested innovation, in terms of the target population, the focus of the group’s collaboration, and the history of the host organization. Action research methodology provided structure to the process and support to the group’s efforts to pursue the aims of the project (Creswell, 2003).

The Research Participants

The PSLLC included eleven members and one facilitator. All of the participants volunteered to be part of this project. Most were members of the professional staff (eleven professional staff, one librarian) and the majority are female (eight females and four males). They represented early-, mid-, and late-career perspectives, as measured by years of service at Rowan (four members of the PSLLC had been employed at the institution for less than five years, three for five-to-ten years, and five for more than 10 years). And, the participants were assigned to different divisions within the university; four were in academic affairs, four in student affairs, three in budget and planning, and one in university advancement.

Overview of the Research Design

This action research project was a study of the individual-, group-, and organizational-level changes that occurred over five action cycles of activity. It utilized an adaptable research design, which provided the flexibility necessary to accommodate the participatory nature of the project and the emergent challenges within the university environment. Table 4.1 provides a summary of the time period and the significant developments of each action cycle.
Table 4.1

*Timeline of the Professional Staff and Librarian Learning Community (PSLLC)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Period</th>
<th>Action Cycle</th>
<th>Significant Developments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>June 2005 - March 2006</td>
<td>Cycle 1</td>
<td>Studying Cox's model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Proposing a FPLC initiative at Rowan University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Planning the pilot FPLC program</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Recruiting for the pilot FPLCs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 2006 - July 2006</td>
<td>Cycle 2</td>
<td>Proposing the PSLLC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Recruiting for the PSLLC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Forming the PSLLC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 2006 - May 2007</td>
<td>Cycle 3</td>
<td>Identifying a project for the PSLLC</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Developing a vision for the PSLLC’s orientation program</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Creating the orientation manual</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Hosting the first set of orientation session</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 2007 - September 2009</td>
<td>Cycle 4</td>
<td>Refining the orientation program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Delivering the orientation program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Assessing the orientation program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Enhancing the orientation program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 2009 - June 2010</td>
<td>Cycle 5</td>
<td>Transitioning the orientation program to another group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ending the PSLLC</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Methods of Data Collection.

This study drew on qualitative and quantitative data collection methods in order to “gain a broader perspective” and a deeper understanding of the research questions (Creswell, 2003, p. 218). Field notes, journal entries, semi-structured interviews, and
structured questionnaires were the primary data collection strategies. Each technique is associated with both advantages and disadvantages.

- **Field Notes** – The advantage of this technique is in collecting “a written account of what the researcher hears, sees, experiences, and thinks” as he or she collects and works with data over the course of the project (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, pp. 110-111). The disadvantage is that it takes time and practice to learn how to describe, rather than summarize, what one observes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

- **Journal Entries** – The advantage of this technique is allowing the researcher to reflect on and to theorize about the meaning of events without mixing his or her views into the objective narrative of the project (Coghlan & Brannick, 2005). The disadvantage is the tendency of the researcher to place him- or herself in a superior role or to suggest that he or she understood something that the other participants did not (Coghlan & Brannick, 2005).

- **Semi-Structured Interviews** – The advantage of this technique is in enabling the researcher to “gather descriptive data on the [participants’] own words so that the researcher can develop insights into how the [participants] interpret some piece of the world” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 95). The disadvantages include the lack of participant anonymity and the time required to collect, transcribe and code the data.

- **Structured Questionnaire** – The advantages of this technique include: posing a standard set of questions in a fixed order, collecting data from
many participants at the same point in time, and providing a sense of anonymity (Creswell, 2003; Schmuck, 2006). The disadvantages include the possibility of posing ambiguous questions and of failing to provide participants with suitable response options (Mitchell & Jolley, 1992).

Rowan University’s Institutional Review Board approved the research protocol use in this project (see Appendix A for IRB Approval Forms and Appendix B for Informed Consent Forms).

Organization of This Project.

These data collection methods were incorporated into the action cycles based on the issues and the questions emerging in each phase of the project.

Cycle 1.

The first cycle of the project, from June 2005 to March 2006, focused on the study of Cox’s model and the development of a FPLC to introduce at Rowan University. The data collection strategies in this phase of the project included: journal entries, notes from meetings, and a semi-structured interview with a member of the planning team (see Appendix C). Data analysis entailed reviewing written records to document the planning process and to identify emerging issues.

Cycle 2.

The second cycle of the project, from February 2006 to July 2006, focused on recruiting for the learning community initiative and forming the PSLLC. The data collection strategies in this phase of the project included: journal entries, notes from team meetings, field notes from the information sessions, field notes from the kick-off event, and semi-structured interviews with two prospective learning community participants.
Data analysis involved identifying critical decision points, noting perceptions of program participants, and comparing the themes from different sources.

**Cycle 3.**

The third cycle of the project, from April 2006 to May 2007, focused on developing a shared vision for the PSLLC’s new orientation program, creating the orientation program, and hosting the first set of the orientation sessions. The data collection strategies in this phase of the project included: journal entries, notes from PSLLC meetings, field notes from the pilot orientation sessions, evaluation data from the structured questionnaire distributed at the pilot orientation sessions (see Appendix D), four semi-structured interviews with PSLLC members (see Appendix C), and one semi-structured interview with the FPLC project coordinator (see Appendix C). Data analysis involved tabulating the numeric statistics and discussing the results with PSLLC. It also included coding the information contained in the written documents and the interviews. Themes from all these sources were compared.

**Cycle 4.**

The fourth cycle of the project, from April 2007 to September 2009, focused on refining the orientation program, collecting feedback from orientation program participants, and building relationships within the PSLLC. The data collection strategies in this phase of the project included: journal entries; notes from PSLLC meetings; field notes from the orientation sessions; evaluation data from the structured questionnaire distributed at the orientation sessions; a follow-up survey/structured questionnaire administered to professional staff, librarians, and coaches who had participated in the orientation program (see Appendix E); a structured questionnaire administered to the
members of the PSLLC (see Appendix F); two semi-structured interviews with PSLLC members (see Appendix C); and one semi-structured interview with the FPLC project coordinator (see Appendix C).

Data analysis involved tallying and discussing the survey data from orientation program participants with the PSLLC. Survey data from PSLLC participants was also tallied and those results will be compared to the key themes in the interview data. Written reflections, meeting notes, and data collected from participants were incorporated into the analysis, in order to gain a broader perspective on the PSLLC experience.

Cycle 5.

The fifth cycle of the project, from September 2009 to June 2010, focused on forming a new orientation committee, transitioning the orientation program to the new group, and ending the PSLLC. The data collection strategies in this phase of the project included: journal entries, notes from PSLLC meetings, and field notes from an orientation session. Data analysis involved coding the information and identifying themes.

Mapping the Research Questions to the Action Cycles.

As the brief descriptions of the five action cycles suggests, the information for each of the research questions was not limited to any single action cycle. Table 4.2 delineates the relationships between the research questions and the corresponding major activities and events of each cycle.
**Table 4.2**  

*Mapping the Research Questions to the Action Cycles*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Action Cycle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| How can Cox’s learning community model be adapted for professional staff and librarians? | Cycle 2 - the Planning Team meetings, the FPLC information sessions, the creation of the PSLLC, the FPLC kick-off event  
Cycle 3 - the PSLLC meetings, the FPLC Mid-Year Retreat  
Cycle 4 - the PSLLC meetings                                                                 |
| What outcomes did the learning community experience produce for the members of the PSLLC? | Cycle 2 - the creation of the PSLLC, the PSLLC meetings  
Cycle 3 - the PSLLC meetings, the Pilot Orientation sessions, the Interviews  
Cycle 4 - the PSLLC meetings, the Orientation sessions, the PSLLC Evaluation Survey, the Interviews  
Cycle 5 - the Transition meetings |
| What outcomes did the PSLLC’s project (the orientation program) produce for orientation program participants? | Cycle 3 - the Pilot Orientation sessions, the Orientation evaluations survey  
Cycle 4 - the Orientation sessions, the Orientation evaluations survey, the Follow-up survey |
| How did my leadership contribute to the learning community experience? | Cycle 1 - the Rowan Team training, the Planning Team meetings  
Cycle 2 - the Planning Team meetings, the FPLC information sessions, the creation of the PSLLC, the Interviews  
Cycle 3 - the PSLLC meetings, the FPLC Mid-Year Retreat, the Interviews  
Cycle 4 - the PSLLC meetings, the PSLLC Evaluation Survey  
Cycle 5 - the Transition meetings |
CHAPTER V

Cycle 1: Creating the Learning Community Program

Introduction to the Project

My involvement with the Faculty and Professional Learning Community (FPLC) program began in March 2005. At the time, I was studying learning, community, and relationships in the undergraduate classroom for a class project. I met with Frances Johnson, director of the Faculty Center, to explore these ideas and, in the course of this conversation, she shared her observations on the condition of Rowan’s campus community. Over the last two or three years, she noticed that many of her colleagues were constantly “busy.” She explained that these “busy” peers were not available to meet for coffee or share lunch. They did not attend Faculty Center workshops or chat in the hallways after meetings. They did not volunteer to serve on committees. And they preferred to work from home, rather than spend more time in the office.

Frances was concerned that these changes were limiting the opportunities for “chance encounters.” In her role at the Faculty Center, these encounters were invaluable. They allowed her to introduce new faculty to potential mentors in the dining hall and to connect faculty who shared a common interest at a workshop. I noted that these chance encounters were the very type of informal conversation and collegial exchange that contribute to the health and the vitality of the campus community (Allan, 1997; Boyer, 1990; Bennett, 2003; Putman, 1995) and wondered what impact a decline in the quality or the quantity of these encounters would have on our academic community.
Frances had discussed these concerns with other faculty development professionals, who introduced her to Milton Cox’s work. She explained that Cox’s original groups were designed to acclimate new faculty to their roles, their responsibilities, and their institution’s culture (Cox, 2002a, 2002b, 2004a, 2004b). In time, his groups developed into the Miami University learning community model. She had studied this model, read the literature, and attended conference presentations. She talked, one-on-one, with Cox and with Faculty Center directors who had implemented a Cox-inspired learning community program at their own institutions. She was convinced that these groups were an effective means for fostering connections among colleagues, re-building a sense of community, and promoting faculty scholarship.

Frances had started to explore the possibility of introducing a Cox-inspired learning community program at Rowan University and her enthusiasm for the project was contagious. I learned that, in recent months, she had proposed the idea to several administrators and had requested funding to send a small group for training on the Miami University learning community model. The request had been approved. She was recruiting colleagues to attend the training and/or to serve on the planning group. And she invited me to participate in the project.

Overview of Cycle 1

This section presents a brief overview of the goals, the major activities, timeline, and data collection strategies in this cycle.

Goals and Major Activities.

The primary goal in this phase of the project was determining the purpose for implementing a Cox-inspired learning community program at Rowan University. Four
major activities contributed to the decision-making process. The first was forming the Rowan team, a core group of collaborators who accompanied Frances to the training institute. The second was the Rowan team’s participation in the training institute. During this three-day institute, the team studied Cox’s (2004a, 2004b) model, consulted with national experts, and critically considered the potential contributions of this technology to our academic community. The third was the Rowan team’s efforts to communicate the benefits of this technology to decision-makers, build support for the concept among collaborators in our community, and outline a plan for the initiative. And the fourth was the planning group’s effort to design our Cox-inspired program for Rowan University.

Cycle 1 Timeline.

![Cycle 1 Timeline](image)

*Figure 5.1. Cycle 1 timeline (June 2005-March 2006)*

Data Collection.

During this cycle, I engaged in three primary collected data strategies: note taking, journaling, and talking with Frances. I took copious notes during the three-day
Faculty Learning Community New Developers’ Institute, the Rowan team meetings, and the Rowan planning group meetings. Following each meeting, I recorded my thoughts and reactions in a reflective journal. And, I met regularly with Frances to review my notes (which, in the absence of official meeting minutes, functioned as a record of the topics discussed, decisions made, and tasks assigned during each meeting), track the group’s progress, and discuss our impressions of the project. In addition, I conducted one semi-structured interview with an active member of the planning group.

Forming the Rowan Team

Frances was the leader of this initiative. She consulted with a number of university administrators in the process of forming the Rowan team. One consideration, the size of the Rowan team, was determined by the funds available for traveling to and participating in the training institute. The team was limited to five members. A second consideration, the membership of the team, was determined by potential member’s demonstrated interest in the topic. All of the team members had experience with or had studied learning community initiatives at this institution.

The team included four white females and one white male. Four were faculty and one was a member of the professional staff. The members represented the Colleges of Communication, Education, and Fine and Performing Arts within the Division of Academic Affairs, and the Office of Institutional Research and Planning within the Division of Budget and Planning. Two of the faculty had earned tenure in the last five years and two had earned tenured more than 15 years ago. The fifth person had five years of experience in her position.
Attending the Learning Community Institute

In June 2005, the Rowan team flew from New Jersey to California to participate in the 7th Annual Faculty Learning Community New Developers’ Institute. The program, facilitated by Milton Cox and Laurie Richlin, led the 55 participants through a series of learning experiences designed to introduce the Miami learning community model. These activities included: readings to present the key components of the Miami model, lectures to reinforce the content of the readings, stories to illustrate important points, and small group discussions to encourage information-sharing (Cox, 2004b). The facilitators also met with each of the 26 campus teams to discuss plans for initiating a learning community project at the team’s institution.

Consulting with National Experts.

Cox and Richlin met with the Rowan team twice. The first consultation focused the team’s goals for the learning community initiative. The team members generated many ideas: supporting new faculty, reinvigorating senior faculty, experimenting with pedagogical approaches, and reconsidering the goals of the general education curriculum. Cox noted that while other schools had created successful learning communities around these themes, Rowan’s learning communities must align with the specific need and interests of our campus. That is, a theme that was successful at one institution might not be successful at not another. He and Richlin urged us to consider: the political climate of the university, the emerging issues on campus, the priorities of key administrators, and the interests of the learning community supporters.

The second consultation focused on the challenges the team expected to encounter while developing the initiative. We talked about recruiting participants, securing
funding, and non-monetary incentives. Cox suggested linking participation to the university’s reward structures, while Richlin described the importance of group dynamics in the learning community experience. She recounted a critically important lesson learned at other institutions; the quality of the learning community experience was especially significant in programs that did not offer participants stipends, release time, or other incentives. “Un-rewarded” participants would not continue to participate in a learning community if they did not enjoy or value their time in the group.

Both Richlin and Cox spoke, at length, about the role of the facilitator. The facilitator manages the relationship and the task aspects of learning community experience. He or she is responsible for monitoring the power dynamics, balancing the different goals, and guiding the participants within the group toward a common agenda. The skills and strategies involved in facilitation are similar to those used in teaching, except for one significant distinction. The facilitator is working with peers, not students. He or she has no power or authority over the group.

With this constructive feedback, the Rowan team agreed to revisit these issues as the planning process unfolded. For the remainder of the institute, the group participated in the planned activities, networked with the other participants, and developed ideas for our plan. By the afternoon of the final day, the Rowan team had outlined a set of action steps for building support for our learning community program.

Building Support for the Initiative

The Rowan team returned to campus and immediately started to generate support among key partners. The team met with the other members of the planning group to share the information we collected at the institute. We also met with the Interim Provost,
Christy Faison, to review a rough draft of a proposal for launching a Cox-inspired initiative. While Dr. Faison supported the concept, she stipulated that she would not fund the project based on the draft document. She asked the team to clarify the purpose, the activities, and the anticipated outcomes of the project and to return with a formal request for funding.

Frances led the effort to refine the draft. In late August 2005, several members of the planning group met with the Interim Provost to present the group’s three-phase plan for the initiative. Dr. Faison approved the plan and endorsed the project.

A Three-Phase Plan

The planning group crafted a three-phase plan to guide the development and the implementation of a Cox-inspired learning community program. The first phase, from September 2005 to March 2006, was a planning period. During this phase, the planning group (a group of 10 faculty, two administrators, and one professional staff) would:

develop the learning community concept, create a set of program goals, select themes for the first set of learning communities, and recruit participants for the learning communities.

The second phase, from March 2006 to May 2006, was a recruiting period. During this phase, the planning group would announce the project. It would also recruit participants from the faculty, the librarian staff, and the professional staff for the pilot learning communities; host information sessions; and evaluate applications for participation.

And, the final phase, from May 2006 to May 2007, was a one-year pilot program. During this phase, the Faculty Center would host the first set of learning communities.
Each community would be supported by a pair of trained facilitators, who would receive a small stipend. The other participants would not be compensated.

Phase I - Planning the FPCL Initiative.

With Dr. Faison’s support, Frances initiated phase one of the plan. She organized a set of foundational readings for the planning group and asked the members to prepare for a series of planning meetings. Unfortunately, scheduling conflicts prevented the planning group from meeting during the Fall semester. However, the members did converse with one another, and with Frances, about the project. I participated in a number of these informal exchanges and notice slight differences in members’ descriptions of the program. I mentioned my observation to Frances in mid-November. She had noticed the difference, too.

Frances arranged for a series of planning meetings in the early months of 2006. She expected that spending time all together would help the group clarify our goals of the project. Unfortunately, scheduling conflicts continued to be an issue. Nevertheless, the group did meet throughout January and February and the members in attendance were quite engaged. They were familiar with the literature Frances distributed and were interested in sharing their ideas. The meetings produced some lively group discussions.

Frances and I met in mid-February to review the group’s process. My notes indicated that we had not discussed a number of the critical issues, such as developing the learning community concept, setting program goals, or identifying the target group of participants for the first set of communities. I was concerned, but Frances was confident that the group could complete the work before the end of March (the end of Phase I). We
decided to create meeting agendas to guide the group through the key discussion/decision points.

These tools were quite effective in providing focus to the planning group’s conversations. By early March 2006, the planning group had settled a number of important points. Frances sent an email message to the entire planning group summarizing the current status of the plan. The program would launch in Fall 2006 as a mechanism for building relationships, stimulating intellectual conversation, promoting collegial exchange of ideas, and support teaching and learning. The project would target Rowan’s professional community (coaches, faculty, librarians, and professional staff). The tentative list of learning community topics included: a cohort-based group called “Newcomers: Finding Your Place at Rowan University;” a cohort-based group called “Creating Community: Modeling What We Preach in the College of Education,” a topic-based group called “Diversity: Valuing Our Differences,” and a topic-based group called “General Education: What Should the Rowan Student Know.” In addition, Frances thanked the members for their commitment to the success of the project and invited them to join in the recruitment of the first set of learning community participants.

This announcement signaled the end of the first action cycle.

Data Analysis

Purpose of the Learning Community Program.

The central question throughout the first action cycle was, “What is the purpose of Rowan’s learning community program?” It emerged in my initial conversation with Frances, in the Rowan team’s consultations with Cox and Richlin, in the meetings with the Interim Provost, in planning group meetings, and in my informal conversations with
Frances. This question was significant because its answer provides direction for the initiative. I collected three perspectives on this issue.

*My Perspective.*

I initially joined this project because of its potential to bolster the sense of community within the professional ranks of the university community. As I read the recommended materials in preparation for the June training institute, I recorded this entry in my journal: “Milton Cox has really created something powerful. His initial work targeted new faculty and he developed a set of supports to aid these folks in acclimating to their new roles. While that is valuable in itself, Cox also took steps to align the program with the culture of his campus. A wise decision, because it meant that the folks who felt confused, over-whelmed, or vulnerable could actually participate in a program designed for them. Removing barriers to participation, creating opportunities for people to get together, and empowering people to help themselves – sounds like a good program!”

After completing the readings, I started thinking about community building and my social work studies. Community is a feel-good, “fuzzy” concept, which means it can be difficult to define. I wonder how it would be defined in this project.

Throughout the training, I listened for clues to help set the direction for Rowan’s initiative. I recorded this reflection after the first consultation with Cox and Richlin. “The Rowan team is generating ideas for the project, but has not identified a central concept to link these ideas together. Cox reminded us that every project starts with a question, a vision, or a purpose. He suggested that we take some time and allow the
focus of the project to emerge. He seemed confident that the Rowan team would resolve this issue.”

Unfortunately, the focus did not emerge by the end of the training or by the end of the first action cycle. The discussions among the team, and within the planning group, in this period did not address the overarching purpose of the project. And as I read Frances’ summary of the status of the project, I felt confusion as to where the project was headed and hesitated to press for an answer. I did not seek greater clarification because I worried that the project would be defined in ways that were most familiar to the majority of the group (faculty) and would favor one segment of the professional population (faculty) over the other segments. I did not yet have the confidence in my relationship with Frances, or in my ability to advocate for the interests of my professional staff peers.

*A Planning Group Member’s Perspective.*

Near the end of Cycle 1, I conducted a semi-structured interview with a member of the planning group. We talked about her reasons for participating in the initiative. She explained, “[I am interested] in the concept of building community, which is what this is all about. To me, the most important part [of this project] is bringing people together and helping them to feel a sense of connectedness.” She explained that this sense of connection gives meaning to one’s work. That is, “although we are doing scholarly work, often we are doing scholarly work with only a few people, or sometimes we are doing it by ourselves. This [project] allows people to come together and to share that scholarly work… [It can] connect us to one another [and] to the larger picture - to the larger group - to the whole.”
We talked about the importance of community. This colleague is familiar with Rowan’s learning communities for undergraduates and spoke of the value of these groups. “[The undergraduate learning communities] allow [the institution] to help our students to be satisfied, supported, adjusted, connected, and critiqued.” She believed that many of the benefits derived through the undergraduate program could also be achieved through the current initiative. She explained, “I could take those same five things [satisfied, supported, adjusted, connected, and critiqued] and apply them to this learning community model…because both [types of learning communities] are a way for people to come together to enjoy one another’s company and to do scholarly work.”

I asked for her thoughts on the ways the Rowan community currently achieves a sense of connection. She replied, “We try to find informal ways to get together as a campus community, [but] they are much too few and far between. [What we really need is a] support piece where you get to work with your colleagues and you feel supported because you are sharing common topics, common goals, and a common sense of accomplishment. So you are supporting one another.”

As we talked about community, scholarship, and mutual support, I asked how these goals might come together in a learning community. She explained, “I head up another group on this campus. I ask them, ‘what is it that you need from this organization?’ I have people at both ends of the spectrum. I have people that say I just want a way for you to bring us together informally, so that I can have camaraderie with people who have things in common with me. But then, at the other end of the spectrum, I have people asking for opportunities to do scholarly work and to improve research skills.” She continued, “To me, the Learning Community concept [can meet both sets of
needs]. It has some type of scholarly requirement, but it is more informal. And, it combines [efforts] to improve [one’s individual] skills with [efforts] to help improve the campus… It asks, ‘what is the action that we are going to be able to create that is going to make something better for someone else?’… And so, to me, it does all of that in one concept!” She continued, “If the learning communities can meet on a regular basis … [and] if they could have the conversation that they need to really design some activities that are going to make a difference and at least get started on those activities. If they can do those two things, I think that is going to be really good for this year.”

*Frances’ Perspective.*

Shortly after this interview, I met with Frances to review the status of the project. We talked about the different perspectives in the planning group as well as the types of experiences the members were requesting. She noted, from her perspective, the learning community initiative could be a strategy for achieving both social aims and professional goals; it could accommodate a wide range of interests. She wondered why the planning group did not simply talk about the options. When I suggested that the discussion might nudge some groups out of the first set of learning communities, France reiterated her personal commitment to including different segments of the population in the learning community initiative.

Frances suggested that we review the current list of themes together to identify which segments of the Rowan community were more or less likely to be interested in participating in each group. While I suspected that topics were more aligned with faculty interests, I could imagine members of other professional groups joining these learning communities. Frances suggested that the Interim Provost might withdraw her support if
the project fell behind schedule, so I did not press the issue. We agreed to revisit these topics as the project developed.

Summary of Cycle 1

Cycle 1 spanned the earliest phase of the learning community initiative. During this period, the Rowan team’s participated in a three-day institute on the Miami learning community model and built support for the project with on-campus stakeholders. Members of the planning team outlined a three-phase plan for developing, introducing, and implementing a learning community for the faculty, librarians, and professional staff at Rowan. Frances was not able to convene a full meeting of the planning team, but smaller groups of members did meet to work on phase one of the plan. Although there were some gaps, the group had articulated a general direction for the initiative and a set of initial topics for recruiting participants for the first set of groups.

Considerations for Cycle 2

As the first action cycle drew to an end, I was aware of some unresolved issues. One was the lack of an overarching vision of the project. Another was the ambiguity of the planning group members’ aspirations for the project. A third was my sense that the university’s funding cycle, rather than solid planning, was driving the project forward. Though I found these concerns unsettling, I hoped that they could be resolved during the next phase of the project.

In addition to the concerns about the project, I was starting to question my role. It was clear that Frances, who was leading the initiative, had a fairly spontaneous and unstructured approach to her leadership practice. As much as I enjoyed being part of her process, I occasionally wondered what I could contribute to the project and what role I
was to play on the project team. Was I a student, expected to observe and learn? Was I an administrative resource, expected to help organize and support the project? Was I a junior collaborator? Or a full partner? I wanted to contribute to the success of the initiative and I was still learning how to leverage my skills to meet the demands of the project.
CHAPTER VI

Cycle 2: Announcing the FPLC Initiative and Recruiting Participants

Introduction

By the end of Cycle 1, the planning group had completed some of the tasks in the first phase of developing and implementing a Cox-inspired learning community program at Rowan University. It had articulated a general direction for the Faculty and Professional Learning Community (FPLC) initiative, to bring members of the professional community together for facilitator-supported, cross-discipline, collaborative learning experiences, and had identified possible themes for two cohort-based groups and two-theme based groups. However, it had not developed its own interpretation of the learning community concept, nor had it designated a set of program goals.

Despite the absence of these elements, the project continued according to schedule. The second phase of implementation plan called for the group to introduce the project to the professional community, recruit participants for the one-year pilot FPLC program, and launch the first set of learning communities. Action Cycle 2 corresponded with this phase of the project.

Overview of Cycle 2

This section presents a brief overview of the goals, major activities, timeline, and data collection strategies in this cycle.
Goals and Major Activities.

The primary goal in this phase of the project was to launch the first set of learning communities. A number of significant activities contributed to the pursuit of this goal. The first was introducing the FPLC project to the Rowan community, which involved clarifying the recruitment message. The second activity was generating interest in the program by hosting information sessions. The third activity was proposing the Professional Staff and Librarian Learning Community (PSLLC). The fourth activity was attending the FPLC workshop. And the final activity was the announcement of the pilot set of learning communities.

As the FPLC program was taking form, I developed a clearer understanding of my role in the project, which contributed to a more overt practice of my leadership.

Cycle 2 Timeline.

![Cycle 2 Timeline](figure61.png)

*Figure 6.1. Cycle 2 timeline (February 2006 – July 2006)*

Data Collection.

During Cycle 2, I relied on two primary collected data strategies, note taking and journaling. I took notes during the informal planning group meetings, the six information sessions, the announcement of the pilot set of learning communities, and the FPLC workshop. Additionally, I recorded my reflections and insights from these events in my journal. This data collection process helped me to consolidate my understanding of the project's progress and my role within it.
sessions, and the two-day FPLC workshop. I made entries in my journal on a weekly basis. In addition, I met regularly with Frances to review my notes, track the group’s progress, and discuss our impressions of the project. I also conducted two semi-structured interviews with prospective members of the PSLLC.

Introducing the FPLC Initiative

In mid-February 2006, Frances asked the 12 members of the planning group to start promoting the FPLC initiative. I discussed the project with my professional staff peers and soon discovered that I could not answer their questions. Though I knew a great deal about Milt Cox’s work, I did not have a clear sense of how his vision was interpreted for Rowan’s learning communities. I could not explain the purpose of the learning community initiative or outline the time commitment necessary for full participation in the groups.

When I mentioned this difficulty to another member of the planning group, I learned that she was having the same problem. She told me that although she had been tempted to present her own vision of the project, she had not. She was concerned that her answers might mislead prospective participants. We agreed that since we were both feeling the same confusion, we should bring our concerns to Frances.

Clarifying the Recruitment Message.

An impromptu discussion with Frances revealed two central issues hampering our recruitment efforts. The first issue was the lack of a clear purpose, a set of measurable goals, and a set of anticipated outcomes for the project. This ambiguity contributed to the second issue, the lack of a compelling recruiting message for the project. My colleague pointed out that if the members of the planning group were providing different sets of
information to the prospective participants, the mixed messages could harm the reputation of the project.

Frances recognized our concerns and suggested that we work together to craft a consistent message. She reminded us that the greatest strength of the learning community initiative was the opportunity for participants to engage in interdisciplinary exchanges with colleagues for other parts of the university. We talked about Cox’s work and selected three key attributes to define our program: community, learning, and flexibility. Frances proposed that these attributes become the foundation of the recruiting message. We also talked about the time commitment, performance expectations, and special events. While this informal meeting did not resolve all of the open questions, it provided the common ground necessary to draft the recruitment materials.

Selecting Recruitment Strategies.

In late February, a few members of the planning group drafted a set of the recruitment materials and a short application form. Frances distributed these materials to the planning group when she announced a multi-prong recruitment strategy. It included: person-to-person phone calls; in-person visits to colleagues’ offices; a series of information sessions; announcements at Union meetings, committee meetings, and department meetings; and a set of announcements through the university email-system. By the beginning of March, these recruitment activities were underway.

Hosting the Information Sessions

Frances arranged for six information sessions. She asked different members of the planning team, with ties to various segments of the Rowan community, to host each session. The first information session was held in mid-March 2006.
Choosing a Format for the Sessions.

At the start of the first session, Frances stood at the front of the room, while the participants sat at desks arranged in neat rows. As she made her planned remarks, the session felt more like a lecture than a conversation. When she finished, she invited the participants to the front of the room to collect informational materials and a snack.

Moving away from the rows of desks changed the tone of the session. The participants commented on the project and posed thoughtful questions. Frances talked about the opportunities to work across disciplines, to develop relationships with colleagues, to practice the skills of life-long learning, and to engage in reflective learning. I considered her informal comments to be a much better representation of the project.

At the conclusion of the first information session, Frances, another member of the planning group, and I discussed the information session. Reflecting on the differences between the formal and the informal segment of the session, we made some changes to encourage more interaction in the future sessions. We agreed to: arrange the chairs in a circle, distribute information and snacks as participants entered the room, and deliver the information in a more conversational format.

How Do Professional Staff Fit into the FPLC?

A number of my professional staff colleagues participated in the information sessions. One of my peers, who attended the second session, approached me to talk about her concerns. Based on the list of proposed topics of the first set of learning communities, she expected that the groups would focus on the faculty point of view. She did not think that concentrating on experiences in the classroom would contribute to her professional development. Although she was interested in the type of learning
community experience described in our recruitment materials, she questioned whether the FPLC program could provide that to someone in her professional position. I understood her points and promised that I would stay in touch with her as the program developed.

I did not mention my colleague’s concerns to Frances right away. I was curious to hear whether other professional staff would share these concerns. They did; in fact, three members of the professional staff raised challenging questions in the fifth session. One asked for Frances’ advice on selecting a group. Another interrupted her response to say that he did not want to be “talked at” by faculty. The other professional staff nodded in agreement. When Frances looked at me, I nodded, too. She promised to think about these concerns.

Adding Existing Groups?

Before I could meet with Frances to discuss the concerns of my peers, she was approached by representatives of two existing groups on campus. These groups, which included approximately 24 active participants, offered to join the learning community initiative in exchange for administrative and budgetary support. When Frances told me that she was seriously considering this offer, I was very surprised. I recorded this entry in my journal. “I do not know why Frances would consider this offer. I thought we wanted to follow Cox’s model, with the adaptations and customizations necessary to align the project with our campus culture. But, this is more than a customization. If a primary goal of our project is to promote community building, and the existing groups do not include any new participants in their communities, then including these groups undermines the goal.”
I continued to think about this puzzle. Finally, I understood. Although Frances has a list of 40 prospective participants, she did not know how many would actually participate in the pilot set of learning communities. She had invested a great deal of social, political, and financial capital in this project, so she had a significant stake in the success of the initiative. Including the existing groups was one way for her to ensure sufficient interest to launch the program.

Later, Frances and I talked about her investment in and commitment to the FPLC in an interview. She said, “As I became more and more convinced of that [the learning communities would benefit Rowan], I kept on asking [the administration] for money [to start the program]. And I kept on hitting a dead end. And, finally, I decided I could carve the money for this program out of the Faculty Center’s budget. I had to cut down on my conference time and cut down on expenses here and there. Because I just felt that it was just that important to do. So I funded most of it out of the Faculty Center, because I could not get anybody else to give me funds for it. I think that says a lot about my personal commitment to it.”

After consulting with other members of the planning group, Frances reached out to Milton Cox. She also contacted coordinators at other schools for advice on the overall direction of our initiative. Based on the input from these more experienced colleagues, Frances decided not to incorporate the pre-existing groups into the project. She did, however, make other changes to the FPLC program.

Revising the Program.

In these consultations, the other coordinators cautioned Frances that the primary challenge in the early years of a FPLC program was building and sustaining commitment
to the program. They offered three pieces of advice: empower the facilitators, scale the size of the pilot to the level of interest, and recruit participants who believed in the vision. In practical terms, the changes meant that the program was now facilitator-driven, rather than topic-driven. Frances urged the most active members of the planning group to consider becoming facilitators and to engage in direct recruiting for their own group.

In a one-on-one interview in February 2007, I asked Frances to reflect back on this phase of the project and describe how these changes fit with her personal vision for the program. She said,

My personal goal [for the FPLC program] was to make a bridge between faculty and professional staff, or between junior faculty and more senior faculty. And by doing that, building these bridges, have a better sense of community. Many times, I work with people on a committee. I might know faculty member X, but I only know that person from that work on that committee. I did not get a more holistic sense of who that person is. And, I think, to build and sustain learning communities on the campus, and to have efficient interaction between all entities on campus, is a good idea. To have a more holistic view of who somebody actually is. To know the variety of skills and capabilities that each one can bring to a table. And the learning communities are one of the few things that I know that can actually do that. I felt that the learning communities fit the Rowan culture better than everything that we had studied. In fact, I took the training in learning communities almost a full year before I actually started the idea and the program. And so I had read the materials. I had talked to Milt Cox. I had talked to Laurie Richlin. I was
seeing the benefit of it; it did seem to fit the type of culture we had here at Rowan…I wanted to try…and I wanted it to work.

In sum, these changes did not detract from her vision for the program.

New Opportunities.

By early April 2006, the changes to the FPLC program create new opportunities. I starting to think about ways to modify the program to better align with the needs and interest of different groups of professionals. From my perspective, the prospective faculty participants were looking for discussion groups to help them think about larger issues or for research/writing groups to help them meet tenure or promotion requirements. Prospective professional staff participants did not seem to share those interests; rather, they were interested in developing the skills germane with their work life. They wanted to improve their practice of providing service, working in a team environment, and carrying out administrative processes. I was starting to envision a learning community experience designed around building relationships, developing communication skills, and collaborative problem solving – a project-based, cohort-based learning community for professional staff.

Another Perspective.

I discussed my ideas for a professional staff learning community with the member of the planning group I interviewed in during Cycle 1. I explained that I thought professional staff might feel out of place in a learning community dedicated to scholarship or teaching, since those topics did not resonate with most professional staffs’ day-to-day activities. I also explained my concern that a professional staff cohort group might not be as well-respected as a faculty cohort group.
My colleague understood my concerns. She said, “I think that there is good reason for you to be concerned. Because I think what [could happen is] clustering …I think [offering a professional staff cohort-based group] is just going to exacerbate many people's concept that faculty are here and professional staff are there. ... And it will create tracks, which is something that we do not want to do. However, the [different groups of professionals] are probably just functioning in their comfort zone. And until we can build a culture where people think it is safe to go outside of their comfort zone, we are going to have quite a challenge. So, maybe like any other change, or especially cultural change, it is going to take a long time.” This colleague acknowledged that, at that point in time, the differences between the experiences and the expectations of prospective learning community participants were considerable. She recognized that potential value of a learning community specifically for professional staff participants and offered to support my efforts to launch this type of group.

Proposing the PSLLC

I finally brought my idea to Frances in mid-April. She was receptive; after the feedback from the information sessions, she was concerned about a novice facilitator working with both faculty and professional staff in one learning community. She recognized that the primary needs of the two populations, on our campus, were different. After re-affirming her commitment to including non-faculty populations in the project, she suggested that we explore this idea.

As we talked, Frances noted that she was comfortable with the notion of a cohort-based group. However, she was not sure about the project-based aspect of my idea. She wondered how this type of learning community would differ from a typical committee or
a traditional taskforce. To answer this question, we revisited the core readings from the facilitators’ training. Cox (2004b) clearly states that the essential qualities of a learning community are: safety and trust, openness, respect, responsiveness, collaboration, relevance, challenge, enjoyment, esprit de corps, and empowerment. We agreed that, in our combined experience, very few committees or taskforces embody these qualities.

Frances then wondered how those qualities could be incorporated into a project-based group. I suggested that the facilitator of this learning community would have to attend to both the task and the process aspects of the group experience. I referred to the community organizing and the adult education literatures. These works provide insights on positioning the group to direct its own work, focusing the participants’ attention on the learning embedded in the group’s activities, and strengthening interpersonal relationships. Maintaining a dual focus would allow the participants to learn new skills, develop a collaborative project, and build relationships; the group could be a learning community.

Frances approved my request to form a learning community for professional staff and invited me to serve as the facilitator of the group.

Recruiting for the PSLLC

I immediately started recruiting for the newly approved professional staff group. I invited my peers to join a cohort-based group organized around professional staff concerns. I made this note in my journal, “I am happy to say that folks are climbing aboard! My colleagues welcomed the chance to find solutions to our common problems. I did not need to convince them that there was a need for this project.” I did, however, notice something odd in my notes from the recruitment calls. I wrote, “I heard the same
set of concerns, person after person. The concerns were: (a) the recruits ‘want to actually do something,’ not just talk about doing something or ‘blame someone else for not doing’ something; (b) the recruits want to know that the project ‘has institutional support,’ some have asked me about the sources of funding and (c) under no circumstances will the recruits tolerate ‘someone lecturing’ at them – no way, no how! Five recruits named at least one of these concerns directly. Three others joked about the concerns. I am sure that the new learning community can settle these issues, which is exactly what I said to each recruit. I am urging folks to complete the application before the May deadline.”

The Learning Community Workshop

By early May 2006, 29 participants submitted applications for the FPLC initiative. All of the applicants were invited to join the project. However, since some of the participants had been recruited under one version of the program (theme-based), and others under the second version (facilitator-based), Frances thought it was important to bring all of the participants together and outline a new direction for the project. To that end, she scheduled a two day workshop in mid-June.

About half of the 29 participants attended the workshop (a detailed description of the workshop can be found in Appendix G). Frances borrowed a number of educational strategies from Cox and Richlin’s learning community institute. That is, she distributed foundational readings, lectured to reinforce key points from the readings, and facilitated large group discussions. She also borrowed some community building strategies. She invited participants to talk about their reasons for joining the FPLC project, created opportunities small group discussions, and incorporated shared meals into each day’s activities.
On the first day, the agenda included participant introductions, an overview of the program, and a discussion of the key features of a learning community. The participants talked about topics and themes for the first set of learning communities. During lunch, the participants broke into small groups, based on theme. For the remainder of the first day, the professional staff group shared stories and identified areas of common concern.

On the second day, the workshop began with a large group community building exercise. The participants then worked in the smaller learning community groups. The professional staff group was highly productive. By the early afternoon, we had selected a project (the creation of an orientation program), identified a number of discussion topics, and scheduled our next meeting.

Announcing the Learning Communities

In early July 2006, Frances officially announced the first set of three learning communities. One group was a theme-based learning community focused on the scholarship of teaching and learning. It included seven participants and two facilitators. Another group was a theme-based learning community focused on assessment. It included five participants and two facilitators. And my group, a cohort-based learning community, was focused on professional staff concerns. It included nine participants and one facilitator.

The creation of these groups signaled the end of Cycle 2.

My Emergence as a Leader

My role evolved during this cycle. When I first joined the project, Frances and I did not discuss the ways I might contribute to the initiative; I simply joined the group. Early in Cycle 1, it became apparent that Frances preferred an informal management
While she retained many details in her mind, I thought it safer to operate with some kind of written record of the group’s discussions and decisions. I offered to take on some of these administrative tasks, and Frances readily agreed to the assistance.

One evening, as I was typing meeting notes after work, a colleague stopped by to chat. I made this entry in my journal, “My colleague asked about the learning community initiative. And in the course of the conversation, I mentioned that I was working on some meeting notes. To my surprise, she asked me if I was staffing the planning group or serving on the planning group. That is a good question. I am not sure.” The ambiguity surrounding my role troubled me.

Eventually, I discussed my confusion with a friend. I made this entry in my journal:

My friend made an excellent point: the words to describe my role in this project matter less than the quality of my experience. And my experience has been fantastic – I have been included in all of the activities; I have regular one-on-one meetings with Frances. Our conversations cover the political climate, the various leadership challenges, and the learning community literature. I am seeing and learning so much about the macro issues, and the micro concerns, in Rowan’s community. Frances’ comments add texture and depth; they help to contextualize information. They help to explain constituent group reactions to on-campus changes. And, they help to decode the subtle points imbedded our community’s decision-making practices. I see how context and organizational history are critical elements for making sense of a situation. These ideas are in my reading on distributed leadership. Several of Spillane’s pieces speak to these points, as do
the readings on shared leadership. These interpretations of knowledge, sensemaking, and power help me make sense of what I see happening in the community. So far, my leadership theory has aligned with the demand of this project. It is a good match.

In Cycle 2, as the gaps in the foundation of the learning community initiative become more prominent, my role changed. I noted, “Frances and I have talked about my observations since the beginning of the project, but now I also bring her my concerns. No matter the topic, our exchanges are always collegial and friendly. We explore issues and joke about my pragmatic approach to problem-solving.” During this period, I continued to provide administrative support by taking notes and drafting recruitment materials. I was confident that Frances valued my contributions and appreciated my investment in the project, “… but part of me hesitates to talk to her about sensitive issues (my role, finding a place for my colleagues in this project). I do not want to jeopardize what has become a warm friendship and a satisfying working relationship.”

Eventually, I did speak with Frances about the sensitive issues. The conversation was significant for two reasons; it carved out space for professional staff and it signaled a change in my leadership practice and in my role in the project. I made this entry in my journal, “It feels like I am stepping out of the shadows – I advocated on behalf of my peers, I explained what professional staff do and do not want from a learning community experience, and I argued that our needs can be met under the FPLC initiative. Now, I am promoting the project to my peers. I am asking them to join an experimental group within an experimental initiative. All of this certainly feels like a big deal. These leadership activities are so visible.”
Summary of Cycle 2

In this cycle, the FPLC project progressed from a planning phase to a recruiting phase. The members of the planning group reached out to the professional community to announce the project and explain its merits. The recruiting message promised that the learning communities would create opportunities for interdisciplinary collaborations with others in Rowan’s professional community. They would support self-directed learning and would foster relationships between members of the group. While these promises appealed to members of the professional community, some questioned whether the learning community design would accommodate their distinct experiences. That is, a number of professional staff wondered how they would fit within the proposed FPLCs.

Based on this feedback, Frances and members of the planning group clarified and refined the model. By the end of the cycle, the planning group had achieved the primary goal of this phase of the project. We had articulated, announced, and refined a FPLC program. We had recruited participants and hosted a workshop to launch the program. And we had formed three learning communities. One of these groups, the PSLLC, was a learning community created in recognition of the distinct interests and unique needs of professional staff.

Findings.

The activities in this cycle contribute to the exploration of three of the research questions at the center of this study.

Research Question 1.

The original version of Rowan’s FPLC program was heavily influenced by Cox’s model (which grew out of his work with faculty development programs). Some members
of the professional community pointed out that the model was biased toward the experiences of faculty. They questioned the applicability of the proposed themes to their professional development needs.

This feedback contributed to the realization that the professional community included a number of distinguishable groups. That is, the members of the Rowan community served in specific capacities, fulfilled particular functions, and had different experiences. There were similarities in their experiences, but there were also differences.

When the members of the professional staff signaled their interest in a learning community that recognized the challenges associated with their professional roles, honored their work-place experiences, and enhanced their professional practice, Frances responded. She acknowledged this group’s interpretation of professional development activities. She revised the program by approving the formation of a cohort-based, project-based group for professional staff.

Research Question 2.

In Cycle 2, the PSLLC was in its earliest stage of development. Nevertheless, the professional staff participants knew that they sought the same types of outcomes as Cox’s FPLC groups; they wanted to develop a holistic sense of their colleagues, to work across disciplines, and to practice the skills of life-long learning. They also wanted to develop skills related to their positions, such as working in teams, directing projects, and identifying the learning embedded in administrative activities. These ideas were developed as part of Cycle 3.

Research Question 3.

No relevant data were produced in this cycle.
Research Question 4.

As the FPLC evolved, my active participation in the Rowan team and the planning group contributed in two significant ways. The first contribution was my success in promoting the initiative among my professional staff colleagues. My relationships with my peers and my enthusiasm for the learning community initiative allowed me to generate interest in the FPLC initiative.

The second contribution was my efforts to advocate on behalf of the prospective professional staff participants. My relationship with Frances, coupled with my familiarity with professional staff roles on campus, allowed me to explain my peers’ concerns and articulate the group’s wishes. These efforts led to the creation of the PSLLC.

Considerations for Cycle 3

By the conclusion of Cycle 2, I had taken on the role of facilitator for the PSLLC. This group departed from Cox’s model, in terms of membership and activity. Given its distinct characteristics, I expected a need to reinterpret some of Cox’s principles and the possibility of some difficulty balancing the task and the process aspects of the experience. I was eager to begin the next action cycle, forming and facilitating the PSLLC.
CHAPTER VII

Cycle 3: Forming and Facilitating the PSLLC

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the first year of the Professional Staff and Librarian Learning Community (PSLLC). It depicts the re-interpretation of Cox’s model in the context of a cohort-based, project-based learning community as well as the task and the process aspects of developing the group and working on our collaborative project. It also recounts my contributions to the experience.

Overview of Cycle 3

This section presents a brief overview of the goals, the major activities, timeline, and data collection strategies in this cycle.

Goals and Major Activities.

The primary goals of this phase of the project revolved around experimenting with a re-interpretation of Cox’s learning community model. More specifically, the goals included creating a learning community for professional staff, selecting a collaborative project to serve as the focus of the group’s work, and completing the project. The significant activities in this period, April 2006 to May 2007, include: establishing the need for a different type of professional learning community, forming the professional staff and librarian learning community, conceptualizing and constructing the orientation project, hosting the orientation sessions, and ending the pilot year of the FPLC initiative.
During this phase of the project, I served as the facilitator of the PSLLC. This role provided opportunities for me to engage in leadership, to reflect on my practice, and to experience the real-world challenges of working in a collaborative fashion with others.

Cycle 3 Timeline.

![Cycle 3 Timeline](image-url)

*Figure 7.1. Cycle 3 timeline (April 2006 – May 2007)*

Data Collection.

During Cycle 3, I continued to collect data through note taking, journaling, and talking with Frances. I took notes during the two-day Faculty and Professional Learning Community Project workshop, the Professional Staff and Librarian Learning Community (PSLLC) meetings, and the orientation sessions. I continued to make weekly entries in my journal and to meet with Frances. I also collected evaluation data from the new employees who participated in the first two orientation sessions. In addition, I conducted four semi-structured interviews with members of the PSLLC and one semi-structured interview with Frances.
Recognizing a Need

The PSLLC’s project, creating an orientation program for new professional staff, librarians, and coaches, was inspired by the lived experiences of its members. The members were aware of the types of challenges our new colleagues face, either from their own struggles or from their efforts to assist other colleagues. Several members spoke of this in one-on-one interviews. Member 2 simply stated, “I saw a need.” Member 9 said, “We all know that new people struggle. [In my office, w]e have talked about having in-house mentoring for new staff, so that we can help them [but we never acted on the idea].” Member 10 said, “I really believe in the project [the orientation program]. Because when I first started here, I did not know where to go or where to turn. And even now, sometimes, I have questions and I do not know what to do.”

Members 5 and 6 expressed similar ideas. Member 5 described the difficulties the new employees often experience, “I think [the orientation program] is really important because when people first start here, they just feel lost. I think the idea of really being organized and having experienced people that are willing to take somebody under their wing is extremely important because …that does not happen all the time.” Member 4 noted, “There really is no orientation to speak of, so it would be nice to create something for the new professional staff. We need to start somewhere. New people fumble around and are given such limited information when they are first hired, ‘okay, here is your desk, here is your job – go’. And very little beyond that. … I think this project is going to help simply because it is going to make that new person feel more welcome. The learning community will have something to show them - where everything is, where to go for advice, and where to go with questions.”
A number of members expressed their interest in providing support to our new colleagues. They wanted to be part of the solution. More specifically, Member 2 stated, “I wanted to be part of a group of professional staff [who] come together to formulate a nice systematic approach [to these problems].” Member 10 echoed this sentiment, “I wanted to participate [because I know that] having [information organized] in a comprehensive resource, in a nice format, with an orientation program will be beneficial for [professional staff] employees.” Member 5’s comments were more pointed. She stated, “We [the professional staff] need something for us. We need something that just is centered around our needs and the steps and direction we need to take.”

In sum, the members of the PSLLC were sensitive to the frustration and the confusion many new employees experience. They were familiar with the struggles involved in completing administrative processes without institutional support and navigating the institution’s unique culture without guidance. They recognized the importance of offering a program to meet these needs.

Seizing an Opportunity

By the end of the Spring 2006 semester, the convergence of a number of factors created an opportunity to address these needs. One factor was the revision of the learning community initiative, which expanded the opportunities for professional staff participation. Another was a shift in my perceptions of my role in the learning community initiative; I realized that I could choose to be a support person or a partner. A third was the success of a small group of professional staff in negotiating changes to the University’s performance evaluation policy. And a fourth factor was my doctoral
studies; I had completed my coursework and was looking for an action research project. The combination of these factors contributed to the formation of the PSLLC.

Recruiting Learning Community Members

In the Spring of 2006, I spent a considerable amount of time talking with prospective learning community participants. I noticed that these conversations had a particular tone, which I addressed in my journal, “Most of the conversations focus on the problems and the need to solve these problems. There is a lot of frustration, which I can understand. However, only one person has mentioned the community building component of the FPLC initiative. And this was a surprise, because several of my colleagues attended Frances’ information sessions. They know something about Cox’s model…This is a hopeful and pro-active project, but my recent conversations do not convey that. Maybe I should change the way I approach this topic with my peers. Maybe I do not need to convince the professional staff that we need this project, they already know about the need. Maybe I should emphasize the opportunities - to partner with colleagues, to solve these problems, and to be part of change.”

I mentioned my observations to Frances. She understood my concern and agreed that people would be more attracted to a hopeful project. We talked about other ways to present the project to prospective members. One idea was to describe it as an orientation program. This conception offered several advantages. It was flexible enough to accommodate both identified and not-yet-identified issues. It was a familiar concept in the Rowan community (the Faculty Center hosted an orientation program for new faculty). And it was action/outcome orientated. I hoped that framing the project in this way would shift the focus from the information gaps to the opportunities.
We also talked about recruitment strategies. Frances urged me to make personal contact with as many prospective members as possible. By mid-May, I had reached out to 35 professional staff colleagues. This group included: people I had worked with on other committees, people recommended to me by the professional staff leaders, and people recommended by Frances.

Advice from a Colleague.

In the course of my recruitment efforts, I had an interesting conversation with a more experienced colleague. She spoke to me about the challenges ahead. I reflected on our conversation in my journal, “I met with [the colleague who would become Member 5] today. Even though she is swamped with work, she is very interested in this project. We talked about some of her Rowan stories and the value of this project. She agreed that professional staff would benefit from more support and that our best hope for change is to organize to help ourselves. She and I have talked about this type of thing before and she is pleased to be part of the group that finally takes action. We also spoke about the difficulty of taking on this type of project … she warned me that in her experience, because things are so neglected, the motivated person who steps forward to work on the problem is just swamped – with the work, and with other people’s frustrations, horror stories, and complaints. She had seen projects grow into something that consumes a lot of time and really does not ‘count’ towards fulfillment of one’s job duties. She warned me that my supervisor might ask me to do this work after hours. I’m sure this is good advice. But the task already feels huge, and to think that it could grow and grow … I had to laugh. She laughed, too. She urged me to remember that intrinsic rewards are very nice, but I should call on others to help. She promised that she is on board for pooling
our skills, coordinating our efforts, and supporting each other. I certainly appreciate that she cared enough to talk to me about this. I think I am going to enjoy working with her.”

Preparing for the Role of Facilitator

During the recruiting period and the workshop period, I was focusing on the needs and the information gaps a great deal. I wrote about this experience in my journal, “The more I talk and talk and talk about the needs, the more I want to do something. I am tempted to define the scope of the project myself, just to get things going. Of course, I know I cannot. It is very important for the group to do that work together. But I am reminded of the planning group. Unfortunately, good intentions are not always enough to actually do collective work. I was not expecting to facilitate one of the learning communities in the pilot phase, but now I am and I want to be prepared for this role.”

I knew that facilitating a Cox-inspired group would involve balancing the task and the process aspects of the group’s experience. Though the learning community literature alludes to this responsibility, and Cox and Richlin had emphasized the significance of this work during the consultations with the Rowan team, I could not find specific guidance for executing this task. Fortunately, I was familiar with the literature on group work and on community organizing from my social work studies. These readings provide a philosophical orientation and lots of practical advice for a change agent working in a community setting. I was not sure that the lessons in the literature would necessarily apply to a learning community context, but I did not see the harm in re-reading some foundational pieces.

After the workshop, when it was clear that the PSLLC would be part of the pilot set of learning communities, I started with Rothman and Tropman’s (1987) discussion of
task and process goals. As these authors explain, task goals deal with “a concrete task or a solution of a delimited problem,” while process goals deal with “establishing cooperative working relationships,…creating self-maintaining community problem solving structures,…and increasing indigenous leadership” (Rothman & Tropman, 1987, p. 8). I then read Toseland and Rivas’ (1987) work to review this important point; all groups feature both types of goals. That is, a project-based group will struggle with its work if the members do not feel safe to share information or to state their concerns.

Bakalinsky (1995) concurs. In her discussion of group cohesion, she writes about the positive feelings derived when members contribute their individual efforts to a coordinated group activity. She argues that for many groups, a sense of solitary emerges as the group moves closer to its goal. This suggests that the task and the process aspects of the experience are intertwined. It also suggests that a group experience designed to produce a change in the external environment may also bring about internal changes for the participants (Bakalinsky, 1995).

I also looked for techniques and strategies regarding group work. I re-read Burghardt’s (1995) piece for organizers and appreciated his advice. He cautions against expecting oneself “to be all things to all people in all kinds of organizing situations” (Burghardt, 1995, p. 57). He acknowledges that some organizers prefer outer-directed, material-focused (task) interactions, while others prefer inner-directed, emotion-focused (process) interactions. He notes that no one is equally skilled in both types of interactions and stresses the importance of measuring the group’s progress in relative, rather than absolute, terms.
Technologies of Participation.

I also enrolled in a two-day workshop entitled, “The Art of Facilitation and Working in Groups,” which trains participants on a set of interactive processes created by the Institute of Cultural Affairs. It included three techniques: the focused conversation method, the consensus workshop method, and the action planning process. Created by experienced facilitators, these techniques are designed to “help groups think, talk, and work together by providing facilitators with structured methods to: recognize and honor the contributions of all; let the group deal with more data in less time; pool individual contributions into larger, more informative, and inclusive patterns; and welcome diversity while minimizing polarization and conflict” (Institute of Cultural Affairs, 2000, p. i). The training featured lectures and readings to explain the processes and practice sessions to experience them.

By the end of the training, I was confident that these techniques would contribute to my performance as the PSLLC facilitator. My role was to help the group collect the members’ ideas, develop a shared vision, and complete the project. I was to support and guide, but not direct, the group’s work. I was looking forward to incorporating these techniques into the learning community’s work. (The PSLLC’s use of the consensus workshop method is discussed later in this chapter.)

Working the PSLLC

Throughout the late-Spring, colleagues continued to approach me with suggestions for the PSLLC’s project. All of the ideas were compatible with the broad goal of creating an orientation program. By the time the group finally got together,
during the small group segments of the two-day workshop in June 2006, the members and I were eager to start our work.

The members of the PSLLC engaged in some lively discussion during the workshop. In the brainstorming session, we shared our personal experiences. We laughed at some tales, and nodded in recognition at others. I felt a sense of camaraderie with these peers, for they shared my struggles as well as my desire to change the situation for those who came after me. A small number of repeating concerns and reoccurring obstacles appeared in story after story. I recorded this set of topics in my notes and reviewed the list with the group. At the end of the second day, as we selected a date for our first official learning community meeting, several members of the PSLLC spoke of their satisfaction with general direction of the project.

The First Meeting.

The first meeting of the PSLLC was scheduled for July 7, 2006 and I distributed a list of discussion topics to the members a few days in advance. To my dismay, only half of the eight members attended this meeting (one of the original members had left the university and his seat was filled by another professional staff colleague). One of the members was not in attendance due to a planned family vacation, while the other three were detained by unexpected work responsibilities. Clearly, scheduling would be one of the group’s on-going challenges.

The members and I spent some time talking about the inevitability of last-minute work responsibilities and the necessity for flexibility in the PSLLC’s process. It seemed that we were in agreement until one member announced that the group must continually make progress on the project. This comment seemed out-of-place. Unsure that I
understood his point, I asked the member to say a bit more. His stated his firm expectations for peer accountability, which clearly conflicted with the group’s earlier discussion on flexibility. I affirmed my personal commitment to using our meeting time to advance the project.

After a pause, another member suggested that, in the interest of advancing the project, we proceed with the items on the agenda. We turned our attention to the members’ expectations for the learning community experience. We talked about what we hoped would, and would not, happen within the group and what we wanted to accomplish through the orientation program. I recorded the members’ comments on the whiteboard.

As we concluded this activity, a member asked if we would repeat this exercise at the next meeting (when the absent members were in attendance). Two people immediately objected to repeating the activity. One stated, in a forceful tone, that those members were responsible for “catching-up” with the group. The other member noted that, since the learning community had a limited amount of time together, she preferred to use our meeting time to advance the project (rather than revisit old discussions). As I listened to these comments, I thought of the earlier remark regarding continual progress. I suggested delaying this discussion until the whole learning community was together. In the meantime, I offered to meet with the missing members, before the next meeting, to review the list of expectations and to collect their ideas. The group accepted this suggestion.

The next discussion item was a review of the ideas generated during the brainstorming sessions at the two-day workshop. One member asked to delay the review until the next meeting, since the people in attendance had participated in the workshop. I
commented on this episode in my journal, “When Member 6 said that he wanted to delay discussion of this item, my heart sank. I could not believe that my first learning community meeting had taken this turn. I figured my best option was to put the decision to the group. As I glanced (nervously) around the table, Member 6 caught my eye and flashed me a big smile. I was perplexed for a moment. And then I smiled too. He knew what he was doing. By delaying discussion of this item, we could avoid the whole repeat/catch-up issue. Very crafty.”

Fortunately, all of the members were willing to postpone the discussion. We then turned our attention to the next item, the learning community plan. Frances had instructed each learning community to produce a plan. The plan had five required sections: a list of learning community members (with contact information), a list of the meetings for the Fall semester (date, time, and location), a list of discussion topics, a list of readings/materials, and a description of the group’s final product. We spent some time on the plan and talked about dates for our future meetings. And, then, the first learning community meeting drew to a close.

The next day, I sent an email message to the entire learning community. It contained a summary of the group’s discussion, a list of possible meeting dates, and a rough outline of agenda items for the next month’s meeting. I then sent a second message to the members who were not able to attend the meeting. In this message, I offered to meet with each person to review the set of expectations generated during the meeting and to add his or her thoughts to the list. Two of the members accepted this offer and contributed to the list.
Between the First and the Second Meetings.

In the weeks between the first and the second learning community meetings, I became aware of two matters. I was approached by a number of people, both members in the learning community and other colleagues, who wanted to talk about the PSLLC’s project. While I was happy to hear others’ ideas, I started to find these conversations uncomfortable. I thought about the reason for my unsettled feeling and concluded that my peers had mistakenly categorized the PSLLC as traditional Rowan committee. That is, they probably assumed that I was directing the group’s work and that their best chance of contributing to the project was to talk with me outside of the group’s meetings. While these assumptions might apply to other groups at Rowan, they conflicted with the assumptions for a learning community. I understood why people outside of the FPLC initiative might be unaware of the differences, but I was concerned by this disconnect among the PSLLC members. I was confident that the members had some exposure to Cox’s work and understood the distinct attributes of his groups. As I re-read sections of my journal, I noticed references to opportunities and hoped-for outcomes. I saw references to structured agendas and deadlines. And I realized that, from the perspective of the PSLLC members, the actual learning community experience probably did not feel very different than a committee experience. It was important to help the group transition out of committee-mode.

I decided to introduce the consensus workshop method, one of the facilitation strategies I had just studied. This idea offered two important benefits. The techniques are well-researched processes for developing a shared understanding of a project. I hoped it would help us bring the various ideas together under one unifying idea. The
second benefit is that the techniques utilize highly participatory processes. I hoped that
the experience would signal that control for the project resides with the whole group (not
one individual).

The second matter had to do with my duties as the facilitator of the group. I made
this entry in my journal, “We recently added three more people to the PSLLC. While I
am happy to know that people are interested in the project and want to participate, the
group now numbers 12 (including me). And that is a big group. Additional members
complicate things. The ‘core’ group has been meeting together since May. They are
starting to know each other and have a sense of what they want to do with this project. I
am meeting, one-on-one, with folks to bring them up to speed. It is not easy to convey
the richness of the group’s discussion. I am little bit worried about blending the new
members into the group. And my current facilitator duties - planning agendas, prepping
materials, making food and room arrangements, sending email reminders, answering
questions, meeting the members for one-on-one, coordinating with Frances, typing up
notes - feel overwhelming. Many of these activities take me out of the office during the
work day, so I am working long hours to make up the time. I spoke to my supervisor –
she can be flexible as long as I meet my deadlines. The good news is that I think I know
what I need to do with the PSLLC and I have some ideas on ways to do it,. The bad news
is that I do not have enough time.”

The Second Meeting.

The second PSLLC meeting, on July 26, was pivotal in the establishment of
PSLLC norms and in the development of the orientation project. I opened the meeting by
introducing three new members to the group. This prompted the first, and the most
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uncomfortable, confrontation between members of the learning community. I recorded this episode, a critical incident in the life of the PSLLC, in my journal.

A Critical Incident.

I wrote, “When I called the meeting to order, the members stopped chatting and turned their attention to me. I introduced three new members. These folks had been interested in the learning community initiative, but had not been able to attend the workshop or the PSLLC first meeting. Each one had met with me in one-on-one sessions and was familiar with the group’s work to-date. Just as I was moving on to the next topic, one member interpreted me. He seemed angry – hard tone of voice, stern expression. He wanted to know why I had added new people to the group and whether they were as committed to the project as he was, since they were joining ‘so late.’ Wow. I did not see this coming.”

I paused to consider my response to this confrontation. In that moment, one of the three new members spoke. She calmly acknowledged that it was her first meeting and she was looking forward to the experience. Another new member talked about her commitment to the project and the job responsibilities that prevented her participation in the prior events. I spoke next. I thanked all of the members for their interest in the project, noted that each person brought a set of experiences and perspectives that would enrich our program, and agreed that we did need to establish some practices to help us work together. I spoke about our non-negotiable work responsibilities and our obligation to prioritize those responsibilities. I hoped that we could understand the pressures our members were under and build some flexibility into our processes.
As I spoke, I noticed some of members nodding in agreement and a few smiles. I asked the group, “How can we help each other balance work and learning community responsibilities?” I crossed my fingers and hoped that someone would offer a suggestion. Participant 5 suggested a buddy system. Participant 8 immediately supported this idea. Participant 6 mentioned that he had missed a meeting and had found the one-on-one meeting with me very beneficial. Participant 7 said that she thought the meeting notes were also a resource for folks who could not attend a meeting. Participant 4 noted that he thought these were all good ideas for helping the members juggle their various responsibilities.

I agreed that these were valuable strategies and promised to include them in the summary for this meeting. I then returned to the next item on the agenda, which was a review of the list of members’ expectations for the learning community experience.

*Expectations for the Learning Community Experience.*

We read through the list expectations. One member suggested sorting the comments into categories. Eventually, we settled on four themes: networking, initiating change, helping others, and learning (see Table 7.1).

Table 7.1

*Members’ Expectations for the Learning Community Experience*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Networking</td>
<td>Getting to know people outside of one’s own office/building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Knowing people as more than a “role”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learning about others’ functions at Rowan, appreciating what others do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Forming a network of peers to call with questions or for help</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Initiating Change  
Wanting to be heard  
Wanting equal treatment  
Being part of a project that does something  
Building – not just talking  
Making PROGRESS/Making change happen

Helping Others  
Peers-helping-peers, promoting peers’ development and growth  
Identifying common problems for professional staff and finding solutions  
Developing resources to cut down on trailblazing

Learning  
Developing communication skills  
Working with a group/having the experience of being in a group  
Talking about ideas  
Learning about something unfamiliar

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*The Consensus Workshop Method.*

The consensus workshop method includes five stages: contexting, brainstorming, clustering, naming, and resolving (Institute of Cultural Affairs, 2000) (for a detailed description of the experience, see Appendix H). The first step, contexting, is designed to establish the importance of a topic and to explore the significance of the topic for each individual member and for the group. The second step of the process, brainstorming, allows the group to pool all of the individual ideas into a larger vision. Each member records his or her ideas on a card, which are posted, one by one, on the wall. The third step, clustering, involves identifying relationships that link the ideas together. Related ideas are positioned together to form a cluster. The fourth step, naming, entails assigning a name to each cluster.

By the end of the meeting, we had established eight clusters: directory of resources, career ladder, governance, meet and greet, professional development, recontracting, university structure, and welcome/initial information. These clusters
represented the major topics for the orientation program. Since we were running out of meeting time, I suggested postponing the fifth and final step, resolving, to the next meeting. The group agreed.

As the members packed up their materials, I asked for their impressions of the consensus workshop method. I recorded these comments in my meeting notes, “Every person had a chance to talk about their ideas.” “I like hearing all of the ideas.” “Seeing the ideas and moving them around the board was helpful.” “Forming the clusters was fun.” “Everyone contributed.” “We started with the blank wall and now we have an outline – we made progress today.” “I would do this again.” It seemed that the group liked the technique.

Between the Second and the Third Meetings.

The second meeting provided me with lots of material relating to my facilitation and my leadership. I spent time reflecting on my practice, talking with the members of the learning community, and writing in my journal.

Follow-Up on the Critical Incident.

After the meeting, I thought about the critical incident quite a bit. By the end of the day, I felt compelled to offer each of the three new members an opportunity to talk to me about the day’s events. I called the first person and braced myself for the worst. I was surprised when she chatted about the project and her appreciation that the meeting included lunch. She thanked me for the one-on-one meeting and said that she felt prepared to contribute to the group’s discussion. She said it was nice to learn a little bit about the other members’ home life. Finally, I had to ask if there was anything she wanted to say about the confrontation. She told me that she was bothered by the tone, but
was not hurt or offended by the questions raised. She thought the discussion was actually productive; now we had a number of strategies for keeping everyone informed as the project continued.

I called the two other new members and discovered that they were not particularly disturbed by the incident. One thanked me for having the courage to address it, while the other observed that she knew that one member’s style was more direct than most. Both seemed satisfied that we had shifted the conversation in a more productive direction. Since these members signaled that the incident was resolved, I concluded that it was. I was relieved to put this episode behind us.

**Reflecting on the Facilitation Strategy.**

Later in that evening, I reflected on the use of my new facilitation strategy. “Well, after a slow start, the consensus workshop method was a hit. It improved once the members started talking to each other and everyone contributed. From time to time, I have worried about this project. I keep reminding myself that the learning community experience is not about what I want to accomplish, it is about what the group wants to accomplish. And this afternoon, the group’s will came forward. Every member of the community, except the two who missed the meeting, can literally see how his or her ideas contribute to the whole of the project – those handwritten note cards are powerful. I am happy that the group liked the activity. I am relieved that we have a rough plan for our work. And I am proud of what we produced together – we took a big step forward today. I know that the PSLLC is different from a regular committee, I just hope that the members are seeing the differences.”
*Organizing Our Work.*

In the following days, I typed the results of the consensus workshop method into a spreadsheet and incorporated the spreadsheet into the PSLLC’s draft plan. As I read through the items in the eight topic areas, I realized that the plan was very ambitious. I wondered if, perhaps, in the excitement of forming the group and conceptualizing the project, the PSLLC had signed-on for more work than we could possibly complete in a series of monthly meetings.

*Assessing the PSLLC’s Progress.*

I met with Frances to review the PSLLC’s draft plan. She was pleased with our progress. We had scheduled all of our meetings and created an outline of our project. She did offer one critique. After pointing out that new hires need three types of support: clarification of role and performance expectations, explanation of the political climate and introduction to key resources, and emotional support and assistance in finding one’s place, she asked if my group had talked about the third point. When I said that we had not, she looked surprised. I told her that I, personally, found it difficult to talk about certain frustrating and confusing issues. It was too risky; there were some feelings that I did not want to reveal in a group setting. I imagined that some members of the PSLLC shared my preference.

Frances countered that a new employee is confronted with so many new and unfamiliar things - new job, new colleagues, new culture, and new expectations. Of course he or she would feel a little vulnerable and a little lonely. She pointed out that finding one’s place was a central component of the PSLLC’s project. In time, she assured me, my group would establish the safety and trust that would allow us to talk
about such things with ease. But until that time, it would require courage. She urged me to find the courage to introduce the issue of emotional needs.

*Identifying Other Data Sources.*

As I prepared for the PSLLC’s third meeting, I thought about Frances’ comments. I recruited the members with an invitation to join in a collaborative process for finding solutions to shared problems. It was becoming clear that, in order to solve some of the problems, we would have to talk about some potentially sensitive or emotional topics. However, I did not want to force the members to talk about their own experiences. I wanted to provide the option of talking about others’ experiences. To this end, I identified three possible sources of this type of information: a 2004 campus climate survey, the coordinator of the faculty orientation program, and peers at other public colleges and universities in New Jersey. I hoped that those data would allow the members to react, rather than to reveal.

**The Third Meeting.**

The third PSLLC meeting, on September 14, was busy. I was aware that discussion in the last couple of meeting had been focused on the orientation program, so I wanted spend some time building the relationships within the group. We started with a discussion of each member’s major activities during the first few weeks of the new academic year. Many of the members have young children, and the discussion turned to descriptions of their children’s efforts to resist a regular schedule after the carefree days of summer vacation. These funny tales produced lots of laughter, revealed little pieces of the members’ lives away from Rowan, and established some common experiences.
Our next topic was continuation of the consensus workshop method exercise. We reviewed the eight major clusters. We talked about items in each of the clusters. We identified resources that were readily available, either online or through the members’ professional networks on campus, and items that would require some research. I was surprised that no one commented on the complexity of the project or the amount of work it would entail.

I then introduced the final step of the process, resolving. In this step, we talked about the additional perspectives and resources we believed the project required. One member observed that our work was a reflection of our members’ experiences, not necessarily those of the wider professional staff community. Other members agreed and we tried to think of existing sources that could convey a broader set of experiences. We identified four sources.

The first source was our colleagues’ experiences at Rowan. Our peers could provide invaluable information on past and current conditions within the university community. The members committed to reaching out to other colleagues throughout our process.

The second source was the University Senate’s 2004 campus climate survey. This data set included survey responses from a large proportion of our professional staff peers. I offered to petition the Senate Executive Committee for access to the data file on behalf of the group. The third source was Rowan’s faculty orientation program. I offered to invite Frances, who coordinated the faculty orientation program, to join us at our next PSLLC meeting. And the fourth source was what the other public institutions of higher education in New Jersey provided to their newest colleagues.
Between the Third and the Fourth Meetings.

After the meeting, I edited the plan to incorporate the sources we identified and the types of data we still needed. Again, I wondered how the group would complete this project by the March deadline. I also wondered whether any of the members of the PSLLC shared my concern. When I interviewed Member 6, in late Spring 2007, I discovered that he, too, had concerns regarding the amount of work. He recalled, “After the first meeting in September, I remember walking out a little bit concerned. It seemed like a lot to accomplish, and we are meeting basically once a month for a couple of hours. How are we going to do this? Is it going to be enough?” Interestingly, he did not mention this concern to me at the time.

I started to think about ways to manage the workload. I considered adding more meetings, but the members of the PSLLC had already agreed to a meeting schedule (two-hour long, monthly meetings). I considered narrowing the scope of the project, but I did not know how to accomplish that without undermining the collective thinking of the consensus workshop method. And I considered dividing the project into smaller segments, such as a sub-committee for each topic area.

At the same time, I considered the member’s reasons for joining the PSLLC. In one-on-one interviews, several expressed interest in meeting and learning from new people (networking). Member 10 said, “I am always looking for opportunities …to meet new people. Professional staff are usually lumped in one area and do not get out much. An opportunity like this it gives me the chance to meet other people.” Member 9 spoke of the intellectual stimulation. She said, “I like meeting people outside of my building. I like to learn how different disciplines think about these things and how they value them
very differently. I find it very interesting … there is very little cross-discipline, cross-office, cross-category discussion on campus, but [this project creates] an opportunity for it.” Member 4 expressed his interest in knowing his colleagues as both professionals and as people; “I look forward to meeting new people. [I like] getting to know others on the campus, their roles and their duties. And also getting to know them as people.”

In my opinion, the sub-committee idea seemed fairly compatible with Cox’s principles, the demands of the project, and the members’ stated expectations. I decided to outline my concern with the workload and propose this alternative in one-on-one talks with a few members of the PSLLC. One member noted that a sub-committee would allow him to concentrate his efforts on the topics of greatest interest to him. Another thought that working in the smaller group will help her get to know the other members. A third was willing to specialize in one or two areas but hoped to be able to comment on the work of other sub-committees. Since these members support the idea of sub-committees, I discussed this idea with Frances. She also supported it.

The Fourth Meeting.

The fourth PSLLC meeting, on October 12, included some big surprises. The first was the striking differences between the faculty and the professional staff orientation programs. And the second was the PSLLC’s response to this information.

*The Faculty Orientation Program.*

I had arranged for Frances to meet with the PSLLC for the first hour of the meeting. She talked to us about the aim of her program and its key features. She spoke of the struggle to secure necessary resources (time, space, and funding) and her early
mistakes. She advised us that some really great ideas will not work, that we should focus on our population’s most basic needs first, and that small changes constitute progress.

I recorded this recollection in my journal, “Frances was a great addition to our group. She was quite forthcoming - about the work required for this type of project and the possibility that things can and will go wrong, despite all of the efforts. She was funny. She teased me. The members seemed very engaged. Everybody was angled toward Frances, either looking at her or jotting notes. I saw lots of nodding and smiling. It was going great … until Member 6 asked Frances about the time allotted for her orientation session. She cheerily replied, ‘three days.’ I was stunned; the PSLLC talking about a two-hour-long session – and some members doubted that the new hires would be able to be out of the office for that long. Immediately, I saw arms cross and members shake their heads.”

Frances did not notice the change in the mood. As she described her favorite parts of the faculty orientation, such as a fancy progressive dinner, meeting with the president, and spending time talking with the new faculty, I had to intervene. I cleared my throat to catch her attention and then briefly described the modest program we had envisioned. Frances looked stunned. She was concerned that our two-hour program could not meet the complex needs of new employees. As we talked about the differences between the two programs, the mood was dark. I looked down the table and saw frowning faces. We struggled through the rest of the hour and then Frances had to leave for another commitment.
Focusing on Our Work.

After Frances left, I suggested a short break. Personally, I wanted a few minutes to collect my thoughts. The group, however, wanted to talk. After some initial grumbling, we had a remarkably productive dialogue. Member 4 reminded us that the faculty orientation had been in place for years and years, while we were just starting to create a program for professional staff, librarians, and coaches now. Another member stated that she was confident that, in time, our program will be great, too. I noticed several sets of eyes cast down, but the heads were nodding. Member 11 made an excellent point; we all knew that there were inequities and that there would always be inequities. The new faculty might have the director of the Faculty Center to look after their needs, but the new professional staff now had the 12 members of the PSLLC. She urged us to spend the rest of the meeting talking about solutions. I saw more nodding. I noticed that I felt better, less angry. I thanked Member 11 for helping me see the situation from a more constructive perspective and suggested that we move on to the next item on the agenda.

Finding Ways to Organize Our Work.

The next item was a discussion of ways to manage our project’s workload. I reviewed the eight topics areas in the draft plan and suggested three approaches for completing this work. We talked about each idea at length and settled on the sub-committee proposal. We decided that every member of the learning community was expected to serve on at least one sub-committee. In addition, each subcommittee was expected to select a leader to coordinate the sub-committee’s activities and communicate
with me, to work outside of the PSLLC meetings, and to develop draft documents for the
entire group to review at the December meeting.

Member 9 initiated a discussion of smaller projects to help organize and support
our orientation project. Some of the ideas, such as analyzing the climate survey data and
collecting information from other colleges and universities in New Jersey, had been
mentioned in earlier meetings; others, such as reviewing the literature on orientation
programs and identifying possible funding sources, were new ideas. I was delighted with
the group’s resilience and its commitment to the project. To my surprise, members even
volunteered to work on the smaller projects. By the end of the meeting, each of the
members present had joined at least one topic-based sub-committee and at least one small
group. The PSLLC was moving forward.

Between the Fourth and the Fifth Meetings.

The weeks between meetings were, again, full of activity. I spent some time
coordinating with Frances and with members of the PSLLC. The day after the PSLLC
meeting, I met with Frances to apologize. I was so sorry that her visit to the PSLLC had
ended poorly, but she saw it as a valuable experience. She had gained new insight into
the lack of support for new professional staff and the real problems that situation
generated. She wanted me to know that she now understood the need for the orientation
program and fully supported our work. She pointed to the draft plan and wondered how
we were organizing our work.

I summarized the discussions and decisions from the second half of the meeting.
Frances nodded and asked me to think about my role in this particular project. As the
facilitator of a Cox-inspired learning community, I could not sacrifice the process
components of his model in order to produce a work-product. On the other hand, my group placed particularly high value on results and action. So, I was not sure what to do. Frances understood my dilemma. She noted that the PSLLC had selected a project that was highly complex and potentially transformative. Her sense was that the group prioritized product over process. She thought that the group might look to me for direction. I agreed. I thought that the learning community experience offered a unique opportunity for the members to develop their process, collaboration, and decision-making skill. Learning to work together was an important goal, too.

After meeting with Frances, I reached out to the three members who missed this PSLLC meeting. I called each one to explain the division of work and the organization of the sub-committees. I offered to help him or her select a group. By the end of the month, 11 of the 12 members had selected a sub-committee. This presented a dilemma. The expectation was that every member would participate in a sub-committee, yet one member had not selected a group. After consulting with two trusted members, I called that member. The conversation was uncomfortable and awkward, but she did select a group.

I also spent some time thinking about the format of the PSLLC meetings. I made this entry in my journal, “In each two-hour meeting, I wanted to allow time to work on three things: building interpersonal relationships within the group, sharing information regarding our project, and working in our small groups and sub-committees. I hope that by blending the three activities, the group falls within the learning community tradition (and not the typical committee). Sometimes I wonder about this project. On one hand, it encompasses a broad range of topics, and it is complex, and we are making it up as we
go…which feels kind of risky. On the other hand, a broad range of topics means there is an appealing topic for each of the members, a complex project requires the participation of many different perspectives, and the ambiguity means that the group will really have to be self-directed. My greatest worries are that members will feel overwhelmed by the program or will feel that we are not making progress fast enough. I am counting on the esprit de coup to get us through the inevitable rough patches. I feel connected to the people and the project, so others probably do, too. By including the three activities at each meeting, I am trying to promote conditions that meet the members’ different needs.”

I contacted the PSLLC via email to suggest a re-organization of our meetings. I proposed that, for the remainder of the Fall semester, we divided each meeting into three distinct segments: the informal conversation over lunch, the large group discussion of the project, and the small group discussion of sub-committee issues. The members readily agreed.

Two members commented on the change in meeting format in the one-on-one interviews. Member 5 praised the practicality of the three-part schedule. She said, “I think the way that you structured the meetings is good. I think it is good that we have a two-hour time slot … anything less and we would not accomplish anything, and anything more people would not be able to commit that time.” Member 6, on the other hand, noted the challenges of working within time constraints. He said “Personally, I think it is difficult, meeting for two hours once a month. Because a lot of time goes by and … I know it has been very difficult for you, at times, to keep everybody focused on task and to keep the agenda moving - the two hours go by real fast.”

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Despite the differences of opinion regarding the schedule, both members supported the creation of the sub-committees. Member 5 said, “The sub-committee idea was a good one – we had to do it…By dividing up all the tasks, someone was working on recontracting. Someone else was working on the meeting and greet. The subcommittees were really important. Otherwise we might be in shambles right now, trying to get everything done… I think they helped us be further along – I think the sub-committees are positive.” Member 6 echoed these sentiments. He said, “I think the sub-committees were good. It was good you [encouraged the committee members to choose a sub-committee]. Then people were able to [focus] on what they were interested in, what they felt was most important, or where they could best contribute.”

And, I met with my small-group, the campus climate survey group. The Senate President had approved the PSLLC’s request for access the data file, and three members of the PSLLC and I conducted an analysis of the data. Since most of the small group had not worked with survey data since their graduate studies, this project presented an opportunity for peer-to-peer learning. We reviewed the survey instrument and selected the questions related to recontracting, promotion, work load, sense of integration into the campus community, and satisfaction with the quality of life on campus. We looked at the aggregate-level responses of all professional staff, as well as the perceptions of probationary professional staff (less than six years of service) and the multi-year professional staff (six or more years of service). We found that many of the issues the members of the PSLLC identified through the consensus workshop exercise were also concerns for the climate survey respondents. The small group wrote a short report to share with the PSLLC at the next meeting.
The Fifth Meeting.

The PSLLC’s fifth meeting, on November 9, involved lots of information sharing. The campus climate survey group presented our report. This created another opportunity for peer-to-peer learning, as we talked about the steps of our analysis and our findings. The PSLLC members were particularly interested in the differences in the sense of integration reported by the probationary professional staff and the multi-year professional staff.

This discussion led to more story-telling. I realized that Frances was right; the group did want to talk about emotional adjustments. Some members spoke about experiences they had themselves, while others repeated tales told to them by colleagues. Unlike previous rounds of storytelling, these tales focused on the struggle to feel connected. I noticed that mood in the group changed and invited comments.

Member 5 made an important observation. She noted the best way to help our future colleagues avoid these problems was for the PSLLC to work on specific solutions. As I listened, I realized that this was another example of a member reframing the weaknesses in the university’s systems as an invitation for action. The group wanted to make a change.

Each topic-based sub-committee also presented its work to date. A few distributed draft documents. Most posed questions that had emerged from or blocked their work. The learning community members contributed ideas and provided advice. One member suggested that sub-committees with similar concerns meet together for the duration of the meeting. As folks organized into clusters around the conference table, Member 2 reminded us that draft documents were due at the next meeting and
recommended that the each sub-committee set a time to meet outside of the PSLLC meetings.

Between the Fifth and the Six Meeting.

At the end of the meeting, Member 2 approached me. He noted the lack of progress from a few sub-committees and wanted to know when I was going to speak to them about meeting their commitment. As we talked, it seemed that he wanted me to step in and direct the “weaker” groups. While I agreed that some seemed to be behind schedule, they still had several weeks to compile draft documents. And, I reminded him that part of learning to work together meant trusting our collaborators to complete their pieces of the work on time.

Later that evening, I made this note in my journal, “Occasionally, I have wondered if my peers joined this group out of genuine interest or as a favor to me. After today, their initial motivations do not seem as important. What matters is the motivation they feel today. And today, [Member 5] obviously feels a sense of ownership for this project. That is a really nice thing to see. [Member 2] is clearly committed to the project. I understand his doubts, but I trust that the sub-committees will complete their work without direction or interference from me.”

Over the next two weeks, I heard from six of the eight sub-committee leaders. They outlined the status of their work. Some described the difficulty of finding time for the three or four members to meet outside of the PSLLC meetings. Others mentioned difficulty locating key resources. I urged the leaders to post these concerns to the whole PSLLC group through email because others might have alternative strategies for collaborating and accessing the resources they sought. There was a noticeable increase in
our email activity. I noted in my journal, “Lots of email messages. Members offered suggestions and provided materials to each other. They did not need me to in the middle of the exchange, which is great. And the added bonus is that the messages signal that the groups are active. Some groups are circulating early drafts. Member 2 mentioned that he was impressed with the creativity of one sub-committee and the comprehensiveness of another. I encouraged him to share the praise with those sub-committees; and he did. In fact, he sent his message to the whole PSLLC – recognition and praise, now that is nice to see.”

The week before the December meeting, Frances contacted the learning community facilitators to propose a mid-year retreat. This type of event, which brings the members from all of the active learning communities together, is part of Cox’s model. It is an opportunity for the members to interact, the facilitators to learn from each other, and the coordinator to check-in with each learning community (Cox, 2002a, 2002b). Frances recommended a half-day meeting during the January break. She asked the facilitators to prepare a progress report summarizing their learning community’s work.

The Sixth Meeting.

The PSLLC’s sixth meeting, on December 14, was one of our most productive. I opened by inquiring about the members’ plans over the holiday break, which elicited lots of conversation. The group had many topics to discuss, so I started with the easy ones. The first topic was a review of my draft progress report summarizing the PSLLC’s work. The report was well received; Member 4 even commented on how much we had accomplished in such a short amount of time.
The next topic was a brainstorming session regarding the preparations for the upcoming Orientation Session in March. We identified tasks and sorted them in terms of activity. Since the small groups seemed to work well, Member 6 suggested that we create a few to help us complete our preparations. We formed three working groups (planning the session, developing the presentation, and compiling the materials).

And the final topic was a series of reports from the small groups and the subcommittees. The members presented the findings from the research on the orientation supports at our sister institutions. After multiple calls and emails to each contact, we collected information from six of the eight institutions. All six of the responding institutions provided an orientation program for new faculty, but only two provided structured support for new professional staff. Kean University described informal meetings between the AFT membership coordinator new professional staff. These meetings focused on communicating the benefits of union membership, not on helping the colleague acclimate to Kean’s culture. Montclair State University was the only peer school to host an orientation program for new professional staff and librarians. It included information on state- and local-level AFT agreements, health insurance, retirement plans, and other employment benefits. Based in this information, the PSLLC concluded that our orientation program was a unique initiative among our sister institutions.

The sub-committees then presented their work. Some had distributed materials prior to the meeting and asked the members of the PSLLC comment via email. Others distributed materials at the meeting and asked for the group’s feedback in person. We ran
out of time before the last two sub-committees could present their work. I asked the leaders of those groups to send the drafts to the PSLLC via email.

Mid-Year Learning Community Retreat.

The major event between the sixth and the seventh PSLLC meeting was the mid-year retreat on January 11, 2007. This half-day event was designed to reconvene the members of the three learning communities for a large group discussion of the pilot program. Each group prepared an overview of its project/topic, goals, and process and a critique of the learning community experience to date to present at the meeting. Each group was allotted 20 minutes. Frances encouraged us to have a conversation about the experience, rather than have the facilitator lecture.

A Critical Incident.

At Frances’ request, the PSLLC was the first group to present. Alas, constant interruptions from one faculty member made it very difficult to deliver my introductory remarks. In a one-on-one interview following the retreat, Frances recalled, “When the professional staff group was presenting its work, one member of the faculty was giving [the PSLLC] professorial comments…which I thought was uncalled for… I noticed it and I was quite disappointed by that.”

At one point, this colleague questioned the need for this project and the topics chosen for the orientation program. Fortunately, the PSLLC had engaged in a methodical and deliberate planning process. We constructed the plan for the project together, and the depth of the members’ knowledge was evident in their answers to the faculty member’s questions. Though I did not appreciate being “quizzed” by a colleague, I was thrilled
that PSLLC members understood the project, felt a sense of ownership, and were willing to defend our work.

The faculty member continued to interrupt our group’s presentation. When she questioned whether the PSLLC was, in fact, a learning community, I asked Frances for assistance. Frances thanked the PSLLC for our overview and called for a break. The members immediately stood and formed a circle. As I apologized for the mistreatment, Frances joined our group. She listened to our outrage and agreed that this incident was particularly upsetting, given the project’s focus on promoting collegiality and building relationships across groups. She congratulated us for resisting the provocation. And as she walked away from the group, one member noted that no one in the room had intervened to stop the questioning or to reprimand the faculty member.

After the break, the session resumed. The other learning communities made their presentations. No one for the PSLLC engaged with the presenters or asked any questions. As the presentations concluded, the caterer delivered lunch.

I fully expected the members of the PSLLC to walk out of the meeting. To my surprise, Member 6 urged the group to stay. He said that Frances arranged this buffet to celebrate our progress and to promote interaction between the groups. He thought we ought to take advantage of the opportunity. The members decided to stay. As our group made our way along the buffet line, colleagues from other learning communities offered kind remarks and thoughtful suggestions on our work. By the end of the session, the members of the PSLLC seemed to be in good spirits.
After the Mid-Year Retreat.

Later, I asked Frances for her assessment of the retreat. She said, “It appeared that the some groups were coming together and meeting on a regular basis and sharing information. I was a little disappointed by the other presentations. Clearly some groups needed to re-group and re-focus after January. But the pilot program is our first effort with these types of learning communities. And I know faculty members can sometimes feel excitement for a program and then forget all of the things that they were going to do….I have hopes that they are going to get it together and produce the documents that they are expected to produce.”

I also asked for her thoughts on the treatment my group received. She said, “I think the faculty, and that person in particular, realized that the professional staff group was really marching along and accomplishing a great deal. And I think that the faculty were probably a little defensive of their work. I think that they were realizing that they are a little bit behind – that the professional staff community was really going ahead and had everything done and knew exactly what they were going to be doing. There was a lot of vagueness, I think, still, within the faculty communities.”

Since half of the members of the PSLLC were not able to attend the mid-year retreat, I distributed a summary of the event to the group. I emphasized the positive, such as constructive feedback from members of other learning communities and the praise for our work. I also outlined Frances’ plans for the end of the year celebration and the possible topics for the 2007-2008 learning communities.

With the first orientation session was only six weeks away, I knew that the group had to focus on the content of the orientation program. I wanted to spend much of the
seventh meeting editing the draft documents. I made a quick round of phone calls to the sub-committee leaders to confirm that their sub-committee’s materials were ready for a preliminary review. I was quite surprised to discover that two of the sub-committees had not started work on their drafts.

*Leadership Dilemma.*

I made this entry in my journal, “I have a leadership dilemma. Some of the sub-committee talk about their work, but have not yet done their work. This is bad news….Option 1 is for me to take over those sections – create a plan, make a to-do list, assign tasks, nag. But, then I become the reason the work is done. Option 2 is to continue with the collaborative approach – talk about what is happening, propose strategies, commit to next steps. But, then I accept the possibility that the work is never done. I feel responsible for this breakdown in the system … I prioritized the empowerment of the members and maybe that was a mistake. Maybe I was too idealistic. Maybe the group does not have the skills to coordinate in this way. Maybe the project was too big to complete in an academic year. Oh, this really is very bad news.”

The next day, I wrote, “I am so tempted to swoop in and take over – so that Frances’ pilot will be a success, and the members of the PSLCC will have a product they can be proud of, and the new hires will have an orientation program, and my group does not fail. But I am not going to do that. So many of the PSLLC’s conversations come back to the same idea - the professional staff needs a cohort of emerging leaders. We need a group of peers who know each other, trust each other, and can work with each other. The PSLLC might be that cohort. And this dilemma is an opportunity to build
trust and establish a sense of accountability for the group, not to identify another ‘hero’. I may regret this, but I am going to trust the sub-committees to come through.”

In keeping with my usual practice, I sent out the meeting agenda in advance of the PSLLC meeting. I asked each sub-committee to prepare a brief presentation and to bring along materials for the members of the PSLLC to review. I did not make reference to the incomplete work. I just hoped that every sub-committee would produce some type of deliverable in time for the meeting.

The Seventh Meeting.

The PSLLC’s seventh meeting was January 25, 2007. I opened the meeting by asking for impressions of the mid-year retreat. The members who attended the retreat described the disruptions to our presentation, but did not seem to be particularly upset. There was little discussion, which confused me. I must have looked perplexed, because Member 5 assured me that our group was too confident in the quality of our work to be bothered by the comments of one person. That made sense, so I moved on to the next item on our agenda, goals.

A member of another learning community had been very supportive of our project. He noted that several groups would be affected by our project and suggested that we articulate a set of goals for each population. He explained that, by clarifying the goals, we would have a clear understanding of what we wanted to achieve. This knowledge would help us now, in the final stages of designing the program, and later, in determining the impact of our program. The members agreed and we quickly generated a set of goals for the members of our learning community; the new professional staff,
librarians, and coaches who participated in the orientation program; and the entire population of the professional staff (see Table 7.2).

Table 7.2

Goals for the Orientation Program

<table>
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<th>Population</th>
<th>Goals</th>
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Goals for Learning Community Members

- Learning more about the University
- Understanding how others contribute to the University
- Networking
- Hearing the range of experiences, talking about problems, finding solutions
- Taking a risk, with a group
- Bridging the information gaps
- Helping new people acclimate/changing the “trail blazing” tradition
- Contributing to the community outside of regular duties
- Creating a legacy
- Contributing to the greater good
- Empowerment/sense of hope
- Introducing new ideas/making change
- Developing momentum to address professional staff concerns that are not directly related to orientation

Goals of Orientation Participants

- Networking – old hands and new hires; help new hires form a peer group
- Feeling less stress and confusion
- Learning about institutional norms
- Benefiting from a “ready reference” of information
- Achieving equality with faculty regarding contributions to institutions and professionalism

Goals for the Professional Staff as a Whole

- Achieving equal status with other constituents
- Gaining respect from faculty
- Communicating the value of professional staff service
- Promoting greater awareness of professional staff contributions
Creating opportunities for mentoring
Benefiting from a “ready reference” of information

And then it was time to review the sub-committees’ work. Fortunately, the sub-committees came through. Some materials were more polished than others, but every topic was addressed. I was so relieved. As the sub-committees presented their materials, some asked for comments on specific sections of the text, while others requested a general review. The members had lots of comments. I asked that they send their thoughts, in writing, to the appropriate sub-committee leader so that we addressed every item on the agenda.

After discussing these draft materials, we turned our collective attention to the administrative details of the project. The planning group reported on the arrangements related to the orientation sessions. These three members had: reserved a conference room, negotiated with Frances and the AFT for funding, selected and ordered refreshments, identified new employees, and created and distributed invitations. The leader of this small group was confident that they were on schedule with their work.

The presentation group was responsible for planning the orientation sessions. These three members of this working group agreed to: ensure that each sub-committee finished the revisions to its materials, develop the agenda for the session, and assign a member for each section of the orientation presentation. The leader reported that her small group was waiting for the sub-committees to finish their work.

The third group, compilation, was responsible for the orientation manual. These four members agreed to tasks like: proofreading all materials, copying and collating
materials, and constructing the orientation manuals. They were also dependent of the sub-committees.

As I prepared to end the meeting, a member suggested that we schedule a few additional meetings. She noted that, for a time, all of the members would be serving on sub-committees as well as working groups, so additional meetings would make it easier to coordinate all of these activities. Another member concurred, noting that we could address any problems in person, rather than through an email exchange. A third member asked if there would be pizza at the extra meetings, which made me laugh. I thought additional meetings sounded like a very good idea. We added two to the schedule.

Between the Seventh and the Eight Meetings.

I was curious about the events that led to the creation of the missing materials and gained some insight from Member 6. In an interview, he reported, “[The leader of my sub-committee] told us he spoke with you about our lack of progress on our assignments. A few days later, we all received the meeting announcement and saw the agenda item on presenting our work. [Another member] called me and pointed out that we needed to get a few more things done before the meeting. [We all wanted] to come into the [PSLLC meeting] focused and prepared. So that when you called on us … we were right there with our contributions.”

I asked Member 6 for his assessment of my handling of this situation. He said, “I know it is hard…it is a fine line between nudging, and pushing, and letting [the group] have independence. You use email very well. You sent positive messages. You stated where the [learning community] was in its process, and my sub-committee did not want to be the ones who did not do our work.” Member 5, who was a member of the same
sub-committee, had a similar view. She said, “You have to rope the group in, without trying to control it…[otherwise] we would be sitting there for two hours and not accomplish anything. I think you have been handling the [task] well. You say, ‘Okay, this is what we agreed to do. Now, how are we going to have to do it? Let's stay on track.’”

_Losing a Member of the PSLLC._

When I sent an email message summarizing the decision made during the January meeting, I received a reply from one member who had not attended a learning community meeting since September. This person apologized for the absences and for not returning my emails or my calls. After noting that work, school, and family responsibilities made it impossible to continue with the project, this person asked to be removed from the learning community. I immediately called Frances to inform her of this development.

Though I was alarmed that a member would ask to drop out of the group, Frances pointed out that this person had missed six consecutive meetings. For all intents and purposes, this person disengaged in September. Frances read the email message aloud. She concluded that the person was simply overwhelmed with the responsibilities of life and suggested that I write a brief note to acknowledge the message and to wish this colleague well. I followed her advice.

_The Eighth Meeting._

The eighth PSLLC meeting was February 8, 2007. The first orientation session was only a month away, so this gathering was more of a working session than a meeting. I made a few announcements and then we broke into our small groups. It was a productive, noisy session. The members moved around the room, exchanging
information. The proofreading group returned the draft documents to the sub-committees with notes and corrections. The planning group posted its proposed structure for the orientation session, while allowing the other members to provide immediate feedback. The compilation group developed a timeline for completing its work.

Near the end of the meeting, lunch was delivered. The members reconvened as a large group around the conference table. I announced the resignation of one member. I expected a reaction from the group, but no one seemed surprised or upset. Just as I started to relax, a member asked me about the intentions of a different member who had missed many meetings. I admitted that I did not know, as that member had not returned my calls or my emails either.

And then the tone of the meeting changed. Four members, in particular, called for accountability. One mentioned the amount of time she invested in this project outside of the meetings, which she attended regularly. Another pointed out that the names of the members of the PSLLC would be included in the orientation binder. Did this second person’s name belong on the list? The third member answered, emphatically, no. From his perspective, the PSLLC should not give “credit” to people who did not invest the time or make the commitment to the project. I asked the group if we were deciding to depart from our agreement on flexibility and prioritizing work responsibilities.

A fourth member turned to me, and with a sad smile, acknowledged that this was an uncomfortable discussion. I nodded in agreement. He said that he understood the reality of unexpected assignments, but wondered if, when I reached out to this person after the missed meetings, did the person reach back? I had to admit that this person had not met with me, in person or by phone. However, this member had participated in email
discussions and had collected information for the project. The third member indicated that, in his mind, it was not enough. I looked around the table, and most of the heads were nodding in agreement.

I knew that the active participants had invested much time and energy into this project. I asked the PSLLC how to proceed. The consensus was that I would call this member to relay that one member had resigned due to minimal involvement and ask for this member’s intentions.

Between the Eighth and the Ninth Meetings.

This was a very active period in the life of the PSLLC. Most members of the PSLLC were busy attending meetings, corresponding with their small-group partners, coordinating with other small groups, and checking-in with me. The ten fully-engaged members worked on the final preparations for the pilot set of orientation sessions.

*Losing Another Member of the PSLLC.*

Immediately after the February meeting, I did place the call to the member with minimal involvement in the project. The member indicated a desire to participate to the extent that work responsibilities allowed. I explained that the sub-committees and the working groups would be very busy for the next two weeks, and then the project would end. The member spoke of the cyclical nature of the member’s position and confirmed that the member would be unavailable for the last stretch of the learning community’s work.

After an awkward pause, I noted that I was calling because the PSLLC needed to know who would be available to finish the project. The member then withdrew from the learning community.
Perspectives.

Again, I called Frances to report this change in the PSLLC’s membership. Frances scanned the attendance records and reminded me that this member had disengaged some time ago. She suggested that, rather than perceiving the change as a loss, I should think of it as part of a consolidation plan. My group was limiting membership to fully engage and deeply committed participants. She saw this as a sign of my group’s pride in the project.

My concern over the loss of the two members prompted me to probe this issue in the one-on-one interview. I spoke with three members of the learning community and each one offered a different perspective. The first person, Member 2, suggested that the two members disengaged before they understood the significance of the project. He said, “Maybe they did not see the importance of the project or maybe they did not want to be a part of it. After what we [the PSLLC] have accomplished, I kind of feel bad, because we did a very exceptional job as a community. And I am sad that they were not able to share it. Maybe when they see what we have done, they will consider being part of a new community.”

The second person, Member 6, mentioned the amount of work required of the members of the learning community. He noted, “Maybe the workload was more than they anticipated… Rowan has [a certain] committee mentality; outside of [attending] committee meetings, maybe taking notes, [committee members] do not have to deal with it. The chairperson or the head of that committee draws up the plan and the committee just goes along with it. This group is different [because the members of the PSLLC were expected to do a lot of work] and I wonder if that maybe has something to do with it.”
The third person, Member 10, also mentioned the work load. She said, “I did not meet them. But it could be just the fact of the time commitment - they could not do. I have had to withdraw from things because I am just in over my head.” As she continued her answer, she touched on my primary concern. She said, “I do not think it was anything that the group did. I do not think that it is the fault of the committee...Because I joined the group late and I found it was welcoming. Certainly some people talk more than others, but I do not have the feeling that anybody would have thought that ‘oh, my ideas are not being heard’ or ‘I am afraid to speak.’”

Preparing for the Orientation Sessions.

In the two weeks before pilot orientation sessions, the members completed the outstanding tasks. I made this entry in my journal, “The learning community is really pulling the orientation together. Member 4 finished the write-ups on shared governance and recontracting. He distributed his drafts by email and asked for comments. And the members had comments, constructive comments – hooray! Member 9 is compiling the sample orientation manual. She generated a check list of the missing items and is tracking progress on the updates and revisions. That is moving things along. Member 2’s sub-committee cannot find time to another time to meet, so they will sit together during the next PSLLC meeting – that works. Member 10 is taking the lead with the written introductions to each section of the manual. She is really doing an excellent job of providing context and explaining the relevance of the material in each section. I am the keeper of the master “to do” list. I am exchanging messages with the leader of each aspect, rather than inundate the whole group with details they do not need. It is nice to see that the group members trust one another to make decisions that will promote the
group’s shared goals. We have spent a lot of our meeting time talking about what we wanted to accomplish, and I’m confident that the active members will honor that vision. This is shared leadership in action. One person’s efforts really do travel across the web and affect another person’s actions. I am so happy to see that members are volunteering to coordinate the various components of this effort …and that everyone responds to looming deadlines. And I am learning which members excel in the different tasks. Folks have all kinds of talents that are not visible in their day-to-day responsibilities. It is kind of fun, learning about a different side of someone.”

The Ninth Meeting.

The ninth PSLLC meeting was February 22, 2007. Member 10 had constructed a draft version of the orientation manual. She presented the manual with great flourish to the cheering group. After a few moments of celebration, she identified a small number of items that required the attention of the entire group.

I noticed that the members discussed these topics in a particularly thoughtful manner. I captured my impressions of one exchange in my journal, “The learning community talks now - not me talking at them, not them talking only to me. We feel like a community. We exchange ideas, ask for clarification, and challenge other’s assumptions. Today, Member 1 wanted to change some of the text regarding the availability of funds for professional development. Member 7 piped in with her experience, which supported the broader text. And Member 1 said, ‘Oh, is that how it worked for you or is that how it works in your division?’ This question was big - it acknowledged that another member had a different experience. It signaled that the different experience mattered. It hinted at a well-known inequity in a non-
confrontational manner. Wow. I think we have developed a high level of trust and respect as a group.”

The leader of one sub-committee asked for more time to work with his group. We broke into our small groups. I distributed a checklist of outstanding items and consulted with the various groups. By the end of the meeting, most pieces of our orientation program were in place.

Between the Ninth and the Tenth Meetings.

The PSLLC completed the final revisions to the orientation materials one week before the first orientation session. We invited a small group of colleagues to review and comment on our materials. And we tackled the challenge of collating and constructing 50 orientation manuals.

Critical Friends Review.

I arranged for the PSSLC to meet with Frances, the AFT president, and the elected leaders of the professional staff caucus. The purpose of the meeting was two-fold: to solicit feedback on the final draft of the orientation manual and to provide an overview of the upcoming orientation sessions. The manual was well-received; the critical friends praised the content and the presentation. They congratulated us on producing such a valuable resource.

Our plans for the session were also well received. I described the agenda: an overview of the projects, introductions, 10 minute presentations on each section of the orientation manual, lunch, an informal question and answer segment, and a written evaluation. Member 7 explained that we had invited all of our colleagues in their first or second year of service. Of the 28 potential attendees, 16 had accepted our invitation. We
expected 10 participants at the first orientation session and six at the second session. The critical friends support our plan and wished us luck.

Preparing the Orientation Manuals.

The PSLLC decided to construct 50 orientation manuals (28 for the target population, 10 for the PSLLC members, one for Frances, one for the AFT office, and 10 extras for future orientation sessions). Immediately after the critical friends review, I started copying, hole-punching, and organizing all the materials to be included in the manual.

Given the variety of materials, we were not able to automate the construction of the manuals. Therefore, I scheduled a three-hour work-session for this activity. I tried to organize the materials within the limited space of a conference room and called a colleague for help. He suggested arranging the materials in a serpentine maze around the room, which allowed several members to work at the same time.

Five members volunteered for the construction the orientation manuals. Members 1 and 9 were the first to arrive. They were surprised to see printed materials piled on every flat surface in the room. I walked them through the maze, demonstrating my technique for constructing a manual. A few minutes later, three more members arrived. The first two members trained the others. Thanks to the maze, the work went smoothly.

When we finished, Member 10 commented on the transformation; in just two hours, a twisted maze with stacks and stacks of materials was consolidated into a few neat boxes of orientation manuals. Member 9 suggested a quality-control check. As the members flipped through the manuals, we had a chance to reflect on our work. Several commented on the quality of the content. All five expressed their satisfaction in
producing a tangible work-product. One commented on her excitement for sharing the results of the PSLLC’s combined efforts at the orientation session. I was pleased. After all of the scrambling and juggling, we had successfully worked together to create a much-needed resource for our newest colleagues. I was eager to host our pilot orientation sessions, too.

Hosting the Pilot Orientation Sessions

The PSLLC hosted two pilot orientation sessions. The first was March 8 and the second was March 15, 2007. Both sessions followed the same format. Participants were greeted and given an orientation manual. The session opened with one member presenting a brief overview of the history of the PSLLC, our goals for the session, and our willingness to serve as supports and resources. She then facilitated a round of introductions in which each person gave his or her name, position, and length of service at Rowan.

The members then presented the materials in the orientation binder. One member served as the primary presenter for each section, though other members added comments and clarifications. Due to the volume of material, the presentations were limited to 10 minutes per sections. After the presentations, the PSLLC members and the orientation participants engaged in an informal question-and-answer session over lunch. At the end of the period, the participants were asked to complete a one-page evaluation of the session. (A detailed description of the two pilot sessions is included in Appendix I.)

I made this entry in my journal, “The PSLLC had our first session today. It went very well. I like seeing the pleasure, pride, and smiles of my group. I like hearing the appreciation of the participants. I like holding the orientation manual. I like knowing
that the time and effort and work invested this project made a difference. Hard work in a worthwhile project is its own reward, but having someone say ‘thank you’ is pretty great. I haven’t had many opportunities to feel this type of satisfaction.”

I also sent an email message to the PSLLC to congratulate the group on the success of the first orientation session and to distribute the results from the evaluation. I asked if anyone had any comments about the session or the survey results to share before the next orientation session on March 15. One presenter sent me her impressions of the session and comments on the feedback from the participants. At the end of the message, she revealed that she had spent the previous night in the emergency room with a sick family member.

Other members shared their thoughts with the whole learning community. One wrote, “All in all, I think the presentation went quite well. As for the evaluations, I do believe the current feedback may help us improve the program.” Another reported, “On my way back to my office, I walked with two of the participants. They had a number of positive things to say about the program. Mostly, they were impressed with the amount of material we compiled and that we did all on our own.”

Another member called me. This member, who had been unable to attend the first orientation session, had been approached by a participant who told her about a wonderful new program for new employees. The participant went on to describe the information session, the orientation manual, and the group that put this program together. The member wanted me to know her pleasure in serving on the project that generated such appreciation from a participant.
The Tenth Meeting.

The tenth PSLLC meeting was March 22. The focus of the meeting was an assessment of the two pilot orientation sessions. Overall, the reflections of the PSLLC members and the evaluation data from the program participants suggested that both groups were pleased with the pilot. The PSLLC talked about the strengths of the program. These included: the content selected for inclusion in the program; the variety of perspectives represented in our group; and the blending of first-hand knowledge, written policies, and past practices. We also had positive comments regarding the organization of the session and the amount of time allotted. We enjoyed the informal discussions over lunch. Our own reflections were remarkable consistent with the feedback from the participants.

The PSLLC also talked about areas for improvement. These included: clarifying the information in recontracting section, adding an explanation of the salary ranges, discerning which participant questions to address in a one-on-one conversation, and documenting the sources of the information we included in the manual. The only improvement noted by the participants had to do with timing; they sensed that some of the presentations were rushed.

Following the pilot session, newcomers who had not been able to attend the session contacted me to request an orientation manual. The members were happy to provide this resource. One member suggested that we hand-deliver the manuals, so that each newcomer could benefit, in a small way, for the networking component of our program. The group agreed and each member volunteered to meet with one or more newcomers.
In addition, the PSLLC spent some time thinking about the future of the orientation program. We talked about the end of the pilot phase of the Faculty Center’s FPLC initiative and the importance of finding a permanent home for the orientation project. We identified possible organizational units that might support this work, and members had questions or concerns regarding each option. We created a list of questions to research before making a decision on our project’s next home.

Member 6 raised a significant issue: at what point would this group transition from a learning community to a traditional committee? Member 9 noted that our group had more work to do on the program. Member 4 agreed; he noted that since the learning community arrangement was working, he did not see a reason to change. I asked if the group wanted to make a decision now, or to keep operating as we were. No one indicated a desire to make an immediate decision, so I directed the group’s attention to our preparations for the FPLC end of the year event in May.

Between the Tenth and the Eleventh Meetings.

Shortly after the meeting, the AFT president contacted me to request that the group host another orientation session in May. I explained that the group would lose access to Faculty Center funding, so I could not commit to another session until we secured a new sponsor. Fortunately, the union was willing to supply the resources needed for the program (binders, photocopying, lunch). After consulting with the members of the PSLLC, I set the date for our third orientation session.

Around this time, Frances contacted the learning community facilitators to plan for the May event. She asked each group to prepare a poster presentation summarizing the project and communicating the value of the FPLC program. She reminded us that
these posters would help build institutional support for the program and recruit participants for the second year of the program.

The Eleventh Meeting.

The eleventh PSLLC meeting was April 12, 2007. We spent most of the meeting organizing the poster presentation and settled on three sections. The first section covered the basics of the project. This included: the names of the PSLLC members, the purpose of the orientation program, the list of topics included in the orientation manual, and the dates of our six Fall 2006 and five Spring 2007 meetings.

The second section listed the goals we had pursued for the three populations potentially affected by the orientation program. For the orientation participants, we aimed to: provide a resource that consolidated important information in one place; provide support to reduce the stress, confusion, and frustration experienced by new hires; and provide opportunities to meet and network with peers. For the members of the PSLLC, we aimed to: participate in developing a new program for bridging information gaps, help change the “trailblazing” culture, meet and network with the members of the PSLLC, and contribute to the greater good. And for the larger professional staff, librarian, and coach community, we aimed to: raise awareness of the resources and supports available in the community, create an opportunity for people to get involved and contribute to positive change, and promote discussion of areas of shared concern (recontracting, promotion, and professional development).

And the final section presented some of the participants’ feedback. We included bar charts reporting the responses to selected evaluation items as well as a sampling of written comments.
End of the Year Celebration

Every year, the Faculty Center hosts an end-of-the-year celebration to recognize excellence in teaching and advising. This year, Frances invited the FPLC participants to the May 10, 2007 event. All ten members of the PSLLC attended. We displayed our poster presentation and talked about our work with the president and several of the academic deans. In this way, we tried to help Frances build administrative support for the continuation of the FPLC initiative.

Though this event signaled the end of the pilot-phase of FPLC initiative, and the end of this action cycle, it did not mark the end of the PSLLC. We already had a date for our third orientation session. In addition to this specific commitment, I expected that the group would want to continue with the project into the next academic year.

Summary of Cycle 3

This cycle spanned the first year of the PSLLC’s life. It traced the long-standing need for an orientation program designed to meet the specific needs of new professional staff, librarian, and coach employees; the constellation of factors that contributed to the formation of the PSLLC as a mechanism for addressing this need; and my process for recruiting colleagues to become members of the PSLLC. It outlined the group’s reliance on story-telling, sense-making, and discussion processes and its efforts to develop a shared vision that incorporated the specific ideas of each individual PSLLC member (Bennett, 1998; Blackmore, 1996; Fletcher, 2002, 2004; Fletcher & Kaufer, 2003; Isaacs, 2000; Kezar, 2000, Kreisberg, 1992; Weick, 1995, 2001). It chronicled the gradual refinement of the group’s vision over a series of eleven monthly meetings. And it provided some initial impressions of the pilot orientation sessions.
Findings.

The activities in this cycle contributed to the exploration of the four research questions at the center of this study.

Research Question 1.

I utilized Cox’s (2004a, 2004b) model as the basis for the PSLLC learning community experience. Rather than organizing the group around a topic or a cohort, as Cox proposes, I organized the group around a project (the creation of the orientation program). The choice served several purposes. It shifted the focus from an academic issue to a practice issue. That is, the members of the PSLLC joined the group to help solve a recognized information gap within Rowan’s academic community. It addressed an area of concern that was important and meaningful to the prospective PSLLC members. And it fostered a learning environment that could support three signification activities: building relationships within the group, engaging in a collaborative project, and pursuing topics of particular interest to individual members.

And, rather than emphasizing the development of the skills related to teaching, as Cox (2004a, 2004b) proposes, I focused on the skills associated with collaboration. These include: communicating ideas, listening to others, negotiating a shared vision, partnering in sensemaking, cooperating with others, and meeting group expectations. These skills, which are vitally important in the day-to-day work of the PSLLC participants, were instrumental in developing the conception and in translating the ideas into the orientation program. A significant element of this experience was that the learning community model did not appoint a positional leader to direct the group’s work.
Rather, the group had to find ways to work together to set the direction for its shared project and negotiation the key decisions.

By introducing these changes, I tried to align the technology with the distinct interests and the particular needs of the professional staff and the librarian who volunteered to participate in this group. In this cycle, the group developed the orientation program in time for the March orientation sessions; however, in the next cycle, the group focused on a new phase of activity, assessing and improving the orientation program.

*Research Question 2.*

From my perspective, the activities in this cycle were compatible with many of the outcomes and experiences the members’ desired (see Table 7.1). In terms of networking, the regular (monthly) contact encouraged the members to interact with colleagues outside of one’s own office or building. The community building topics that I incorporated into every monthly meeting made it possible for members to learn about others’ positions at Rowan and their interests outside of the university.

This cycle provided clear opportunities to participate in initiating change. The group’s collaborative processes, such as the technologies of facilitation experience, the discussion-based meetings, and the smaller work groups, created space for members to express their ideas. Over the year, we moved from talking to planning to acting.

The interview data indicate that members felt a sense of pride for and ownership of the orientation program. These feelings were also evident in the members’ comments during the mid-year retreat, the compilation of the orientation manuals, and the post-orientation assessment discussions. They suggest that the experience to date met the members’ expectations for helping others, finding solutions, and developing resources.
And, in my journal entries, I found evidence of learning. More specifically, I observed the members of the PSLLC learning to learn from one another’s experiences. In August, I drew the group’s attention to related ideas and asked the speakers to compare and contrast their stories. In October, I heard some tentative questioning among the members. And, in February, the members engaged in robust discussion of our different experiences.

In addition to the expectations articulated by the members, I appreciated the contributions of the various members. Through my notes, I saw that each individual contributed to the health and productivity of the group. For example, I wrote, “Member 6, for example, has a very warm way of building on earlier comments. A dash of recognition, a sprinkle of respect, and then he adds his contribution. Member 1 asks really good questions. She sees things I do not notice. Member 7 has a way of listening to the different speakers and then thoughtfully summarizing the different points of view. That is quite a talent.”

I also saw how others’ strengths complimented my weaknesses. There were times when an event or a comment took me by surprise. If I needed a moment to process my thoughts, others were willing to offer their comments or to provide direction to the discussion.

Research Question 3.

The PSLLC collected evaluation data from the participants of the pilot orientation sessions. Given the small number of participants, the PSLLC conducted a cursory review. These data, coupled with the comments made during and after the sessions, suggest that the participants recognized the value of the orientation manual. They
welcomed the opportunity to meet the members of the committee and the other newcomers. And they appreciated that the members of the PSLLC extended the effort to provide new employees with information, resources, and relationships that support the newcomers’ success. These early findings suggest that the orientation program had the potential to achieve to participant goals recorded in Table 7.2. The PSLLC conducted a more detailed analysis in Cycle 4.

Research Question 4.

Most of the significant leadership challenges in the cycle revolved around finding ways to convert ideas into actions. My first contributions to the PSLLC experience, including recognizing the opportunity to form the PSLLC, proposing the group, and recruiting the members, required that I present compelling arguments to my prospective collaborators. Through my graduate studies, I was trained to identify the strengths in a community. This orientation helped me re-frame the information gaps as an opportunity for change and re-frame my peers experience navigating these issues as valuable assets for solving a shared problem. Frances, and the members of the group, responded to my message and supported the creation of the PSLLC.

Once the PSLLC was formed, I faced the challenge of actually facilitating the group. Cox’s (2004a, 2004b) work provided some guidance; however, the revisions I made to his model in the creation of this group had an impact on the functioning of the group. The members of the PSLLC shared more than a curriculum or subject-area, they shared responsibility for a collaborative project. To meet the expectations of my role and support this group, I needed theories and strategies to support the dual focuses of this particular learning community experience (building a sense of community within the
group and creating an orientation program for our newest colleagues). I relied on adult education literature, community development literature, and facilitator training. These resources, along with the contributions of the PSLLC members, helped me to channel my occasional urge to direct the group’s process into a more productive contribution, to take on the uncomfortable process aspects of my role, and to manage my personal sensitivities that emerged in the course of my practice.

In addition, this cycle provided opportunities for me to practice shared leadership. I was fortunate enough to collaborate with folks whose strengths complimented my weaknesses. When I felt confused or overwhelmed, which happened in a number of situations, it was a tremendous relief to know that others would willingly offer guidance. This was a particularly powerful and valuable lesson. I learned to trust that the members of our group were as invested and as committed to the success of the project as I was. This knowledge helped me to combat the sense that I was responsible for the overall success or the overall failure of this experiment.

Considerations for Cycle 4

As the pilot year of the FPLC came to an end, I reflected on my experience. I was proud of all that the PSLLC had accomplished; we had created a much-needed orientation program through a highly collaborative and self-directed process. I considered both the final product and the group’s process significant successes. That said, I did think that there was more work for the group to do – both with the orientation program and with our budding relationships. I was curious about the future of the group. If the PSLLC was not racing to complete it work to meet a deadline, how would the

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dynamics change? And, as the task shifted from creating the program to maintaining the program, would the members continue to enjoy the work?

In addition to these questions, a number of issues required attention. These included: securing a steady source of funding for the program, finding an organizational home for the program, revising the program, establishing linkages with other groups on campus, and creating a transition plan to pass the project on to another group.
CHAPTER VIII

Cycle 4: Assessing and Refining the Orientation Program

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the second, third, and fourth years of the Professional Staff and Librarian Learning Community (PSLLC) experience (Cycle 4). It recounts the group’s efforts to assess and improve our orientation program for newly hired professional staff, librarians, and coaches. It describes the process aspects of the experience, as well as the relationships that developed within the groups. And it describes my contributions to the experience.

Overview of Cycle 4

This section presents a brief overview of the goals, the major activities, timeline, and data collection strategies in this cycle.

Goals and Major Activities.

The primary goals in this phase of the PSLLC’s experience were to actualize the orientation program we envisioned in Cycle 3 and to develop the interpersonal relationships among members of the PSLLC. The significant activities in this period, April 2007 to September 2009 included: hosting orientation sessions, assessing the orientation program, adding program enhancement to the orientation program, administering a follow-up survey to orientation program participants, and assessing the learning community experience. I continued to serve as the group’s facilitator.
Cycle 4 Timeline.

AFT Requested Another Orientation session

Hosted Orientation Session #3

Reflected on FPLC Initiative

Shifted PSLLC’s Affiliation from the Faculty Center to the AFT

Reviewed Orientation Evaluation Data

Apr-07 May-07 Jun-07 Jul-07 Aug-07 Sep-07 Oct-07 Nov-07 Dec-07 Jan-08 Feb-08 Mar-08

Hosted Orientation #6

Formed Website and Follow-Up Survey Sub-Committees

Reviewed Orientation Evaluation Data

Apr-08 May-08 Jun-08 Jul-08 Aug-08 Sep-08 Oct-08 Nov-08 Dec-08 Jan-09 Feb-09 Mar-09

Hosted Orientation #8/Website Operational

Worked on Website

Apr-09 May-09 Jun-09 Jul-09 Aug-09 Sep-09

Planned the Transition
Figure 8.1. Cycle 4 timeline (April 2007 – September 2009)

Data Collection.

During Cycle 4, I engaged in a number of data collection strategies. I took notes during the PSLLC meetings and the orientation sessions. I made weekly entries in my journal and collected data through the administration of three surveys: the orientation evaluation survey, the follow-up survey, and the PSLLC evaluation survey. In addition, I conducted two semi-structured interviews with members in the PSLLC and one semi-structured interview with Frances.

Continuing Our Work

The end of Cycle 3 was a very busy time for the PSLLC. During that period, the group focused its attention on meeting critical deadlines for the orientation program and the end of the year event. Although the group did talk about the future of the PSLLC and the orientation program in our March meeting, we did not reach any decisions. In mid-April, just as I was considering how to re-visit these issues with the group, I received a call from a member of the AFT leadership team.

This colleague explained that as the university prepared to launch a major new initiative in the coming months, a number of new employees would join the professional staff ranks. She thought that these new employees would benefit from the PSLLC’s orientation program and wondered whether we planned to continue the project. I passed this information along to the members of the PSLLC in an email message and asked for recommendations. All of the members expressed interest in continuing with the project for another year.
I sent another message proposing a date for the third orientation session and suggested that we all continue with the assignments we had in the pilot sessions. Almost immediately, a member called me asking to be re-assigned to a different type of task. As we talked, I realized that the presentation group had assigned roles without regard to member preferences. As a result, this member found herself in an uncomfortable (public speaking) role.

I understood this member’s concerns and suggested that I offer all of the members a chance to change assignments. I called each member to invite him or her to consider trying a new role and building different skills at the up-coming orientation session. Some members stated specific preferences, while others were willing to serve in any capacity needed. Using this new information, I re-assigned the tasks.

Hosting the Third Orientation Session.

The PSLLC hosted the third orientation session on May 17, 2007. With nine participants, it was our largest group to date. I made this observation in my journal, “This session seemed different. One big change was the reassignment of tasks - what a difference! Some presenters are much more confident in the new role. I see changes in their facial expressions, tone of voice, and response to questions. The second change was in the characteristics of the participants. All of the participants were actually new hires (with less than three months of services). In addition, we had our first librarian. And the third change was in questions from the participants - lots of detailed questions today. We actually ran out of time by the last presentation. Overall, it was a very good session – the members seemed friendly and knowledgeable and the participants seemed interested and engaged.”
After the Orientation Session.

As usual, I tallied the evaluation data and distributed the results to the members of the PSLLC via email. I also included a list of possible next steps for the program. It included: evaluating the pilot version of the orientation program, revising the orientation program, finding a home (and a source of funding) for the program, and setting a new schedule for PSLLC meetings. And, since I was sensitive to the amount of time the members’ had committed to this project in recent months, I offered the group a choice. We could meet over the Summer, or we could go on hiatus until the Fall semester. The members chose the hiatus.

The PSLLC Hiatus

The hiatus from the monthly PSLLC meetings allowed me to focus on research tasks. Over the Summer, I conducted interviews and met with Frances. I coded the data in my meeting notes, field observations, and reflective journal. I read and re-read these documents and noticed that, to some extent, the faculty and professional learning community (FPLC) initiative, the PSLLC, and the orientation program had blurred into one large project. I had to spend some time re-drawing the boundaries between the three projects before I could prepare for the next phase of the PSLLC’s work.

Reflecting on the PSLLC Experiment.

A project-based group for a professional staff and librarian cohort was not part of the original vision for the learning community initiative. Developments in the latter part of Cycle 2 created new opportunities for experimenting with Cox’s (2004a, 2004b) model. These changes, coupled with other factors, led to the proposal of the PSLLC.
This group was an experimental learning community and Frances and I reflected on this group in two taped interviews.

After the Winter Retreat.

I conducted the first interview shortly after the Winter Retreat in January 2007. By that time, it was clear that the PSLLC was unlike the other groups. At the start of the interview, Frances’ position was, "The [learning communities’] tasks are decidedly different. There is no question about that. But, they still are, in my mind, of equal value and equal merit.” As the interview progressed, she compared the PSLLC to the other two learning communities. She said, "I see [one of the faculty learning communities] as…more like the ‘campus conversation’ groups we used to have. And that type of group – where we would have conversations about our teaching or do a case study, or [discuss] whatever it was we felt like talking about at the time - can be valuable and wonderful. In fact, many faculty used to say that it was the one thing that kept them sane in the course of their semester at Rowan. But those [campus conversation ] groups never produced anything…and they are not learning communities, not according to Cox and Richlin’s definition…And one of my goals …is to make sure that something is going to get produced [by the learning communities].” She continued, “I know that the other two [learning communities] will produce something, but it will certainly not be of the caliber of what the professional staff is producing.” This comment positioned the PSLLC as a successful experiment in learning community technology.

However, a few minutes later, Frances questioned whether the PSLLC actually qualified as a learning community. She said, “And it has occurred to me that the [PSLLC] group is looking more like a committee as opposed to a learning community.”
Together, we reviewed Cox’s (2004b) list of essential elements for a learning community and agreed that, so far, the PSLLC experience included those elements. Frances noted, “[The PSLLC is] meeting together and having food …and having the social component [so it does incorporate key elements of Cox’s model].”

We also talked about factors that might contribute to the PSLLC’s success. One was the group’s focus on a collaborative project. Frances noted that, in contrast, the topic-based learning communities were struggling to find common ground. “The [individual] projects are too disparate and it is too hard to bring them together …[The facilitators] are having trouble connecting [the projects and focusing the group discussions.]”

Another factor was my dissertation. Frances observed, “Although the dissertation is not the reason the group came together to create the orientation program… it has been the impetus to go ahead and to do [the work]… It created a forum [for the members] to do a wonderful thing.”

A third factor was the nature of the collaborative project, creating a new program to provide critical supports to our colleagues. Frances noted, “[The PSLLC] has a sense of accountability … and a deadline [for hosting the first set of orientation session]. [It also] will produce a tangible product, a document [the orientation manual].” Frances believed that these features helped to bolster the members’ commitment to the PSLLC.

And a fourth factor was tapping into the members’ sense of empowerment. I noted, “I think one of the unintended benefits of this experience has been the empowerment of my group. We are recapturing the hope that little, tiny steps can make a difference.” Frances said, “I wholly agree with that. [At the mid-year point,] …you are
seeing that these small steps make progress. We all have to go in these little, tiny steps. No one can lead you to effective change in giant steps. It doesn’t work that way. Little, small steps. Little kinds of things – that is what works.”

In sum, the PSLLC was meeting Frances’ expectations. The group was meeting regularly and was making progress on its collaborative project. The majority of the members were attending meetings and contributing to the project. I was fulfilling my responsibilities as the group’s facilitator. And the conditions within the group were consistent with Cox’s (2004b) essential elements. At the mid-year point, the PSLLC was the strongest of the three pilot learning communities.

At the End of the Pilot Year.

I conducted my second interview with Frances at the conclusion of the pilot year (May 2007). For most of the interview, we compared the pilot year to the initial vision for the program. As she reflected on the pilot, Frances expressed mixed feelings. “[It was] good and bad, I would say…The honest answer to that question is not as good as I would have expected. I expected at least two of the groups to be highly successful. And I think we had one group that was highly successful [the PSLLC], one group that was marginally successful, and another group that was completely and totally dysfunctional. And I had not anticipated that.”

We explored this outcome in terms of the strengths and the weaknesses of the program. She replied, “Overall, I think the principal strength of the project was bringing people together who would not normally be together. Because whether that is with professional staff, who are meeting across offices; or faculty, who are meeting across colleges; or faculty and professional staff meeting together – it is something that does not
happen on the campus. This is the only place where it happens, aside from a committee meeting. [Another strength was the dynamic within the groups.] In a committee meeting, there is a task. In a task force, there is a job. In this group, the people were in charge of their own learning … They … decided what groups they wanted to be in, what materials they wanted me to order, and how they were going to use those materials. That is empowering. So [this pilot project] really [introduced a new way] of working together.”

As for the principal weakness, Frances said that some of the participants “did not make the time that they were supposed to make and did not honor the commitment that they said that they were going to give.” Although this was a concern for all three groups, the members of the PSLLC were more engaged than the members of the other groups. We talked about the time commitment required to fully participate in a learning community.

Reflecting on the demands of my role, I noted, “Doing all of the administrative tasks, pulling everything together, and touching base with everybody; I could not fit the work into the traditional work week. I did most of the facilitation after hours and on the weekend. It really required a lot of time and a lot of attention, more than I expected. But the project mattered to me and the group matter to me. And I made the commitment. So I found the time to do the work that project required. But, I understand the difficulty of adding this project to all of one’s other responsibilities.” She replied, “Yes, you put the time in and did whatever the project needed. You offered a broad vision and let the members fill in the details. You also handled a lot of the detail work, the scheduling, the pre-planning, the follow-up, so the [members] could focus on the real work. And you
kept me informed, which I appreciated. Your group had goals, accomplished those goals, and really made something happen.”

Frances talked about the unique aspects of the PSLLC. She said that organizing around a project, rather than a theme, focused our work and required the members of the PSLLC to work more closely than participants in a typical Cox-inspired learning community. She thought that the PSLLC was particularly effective in leveraging the “learning community…as an opportunity to work … on a project that needed attention…[and] to bring folks together to figure out how to create something new and make it work.”

In fact, the success of the PSLLC prompted Frances to consider a learning community for new faculty. Our program convinced her that, “new people really need more support. They should talk with different groups of people to learn how to navigate the waters.” She saw how senior, mid-career, and early-career colleagues made valuable contributions to the PSLLC’s program and wanted to offer new faculty “that type of guidance.”

Another weakness stemmed from the challenge of managing strong personalities. Frances said, “strong personalities, sometimes, they just flat out present problems. They really do. [They can derail the group’s process]…if the facilitator or the group does not deal with them.” Whereas the PSLLC managed to incorporate different perspectives into our work, the other groups struggled. Frances hoped that, “as the project grows, we may be more selective about who is selected to participate in the learning communities. For the first year, we accepted everyone who was interested … and that created problems.”
In sum, Frances considered the PSLLC to be different from the two other groups and to be an experiment with learning community technology. From her perspective, the experiment was a success. A number of the factors contributed to this success, including a meaningful project, a committed and able facilitator, and a collegial group of participants. The PSLLC provided a valuable point of comparison for critically evaluating elements of the FPLC initiative.

The Future of the PSLLC.

Frances and I also talked about the future of the PSLLC. Although she could not continue to host our group in the Faculty Center, she wanted to help us finding a new organizational home. We discussed the costs associated with the orientation program (photocopies, binders, and lunch) and the possible funding sources (the AFT, the Senate, the Office of Human Resources, and the other units that supported the Faculty Center’s orientation program). We also discussed the benefits and the constraints of these options. After much consideration, Frances recommended housing the PSLLC under the auspices of the AFT’s professional staff caucus. This recommendation made sense, and I committed to presenting our analysis to the PSLLC after the hiatus.

The Twelfth Meeting

I arranged an organizational meeting of the PSLLC, in mid-October 2007, to plan for the next orientation session and to talk about the future of the group. Since the group had not been together for some time, I reserved the first part of the meeting for socializing. I opened the meeting with a large group discussion of new initiatives on campus. As usual, the members took turns sharing information. I was surprised to find that, when I tried to re-focus the conversation on our agenda, several members engaged in
side conversations. After a few minutes, I tried again. One of the members patted another on the shoulder and said, “You guys can catch-up after the meeting. We have to do our work now.”

The second part of the meeting was dedicated to our search for a new organizational home. I explained that our group would not be sponsored by the Faculty Center any longer and that I would not be reporting our progress to Frances. I summarized Frances’ perspectives on alternate sponsors for our group. The members agreed that the AFT offered the best fit. Two members volunteered to present our request to the AFT leadership.

In the third part, we outlined our primary activities for the remainder of the academic year. We selected a set of major and a set of minor program enhancement to institute by the end of the year and formed small groups to work on those projects. I noted, with some surprise, that the members were eager to begin work on the program enhancements. However, I used the last few minutes of the meeting to prepare for the upcoming information session.

Hosting the Fourth Orientation Session

The PSLLC hosted the fourth orientation session on November 28, 2007. This session included a total of nine participants, two of whom were in reclassified positions and two in coaching positions. It also included a special guest (an AFT leader who was not a member of the learning community). These additions changed the dynamics in the session and contributed to one minor incident and one critical incident.
Minor Incident.

One of the participants had been with the university for a number of years; she had worked as a part-time temporary employee, a full-time clerical employee, and now as a full-time professional staff employee. In this time, she experienced many difficulties. Unfortunately, she wanted to share her stories during the orientation session. I made this observation in my field notes, “One participant was so disruptive that the presenters were not able to cover their material. I was confident that her stories were true, but this was not the place to voice her frustrations. I passed a note to the PSLLC member sitting closest to her, which asked him to invite this participant to meet with me after the session. After he extended this invitation, the presentations continued. It was going well, until we reached the section on the AFT.”

Critical Incident.

Early in the development of this program, the PSLLC had a lengthy exchange on how to present the AFT (our union) during our sessions. Several of the members were adamant that the PSLLC not exert pressure on the orientation participants to join the AFT. Others wanted to ensure that the participants understood the benefits of membership. We agreed that our role was to provide the information necessary for each participant to make his or her own informed choice. To that end, one member created a brochure, which was approved by the AFT leadership team, to include in the orientation manual. Based on the feedback from the first three sessions, the members of the PSLLC and the orientation participants seemed to be pleased with this arrangement.

We continued with the approach for the fourth orientation session. However, just as the presenter concluded her remarks on the AFT, our special guest raised her hand.
The guest offered a very different perspective; she described the difficulties colleagues had experienced over the years and the importance of union “protection.” As she spoke, I glanced around the room. The participants were looking away from the special guest. One member of the learning community was frowning, another was shaking her head, “no.” When the guest paused, I suggested that we re-visit this discussion after completing the formal presentations and quickly introduced the next presenter.

As the next presenter waited for his PowerPoint file to open, the special guest resumed her commentary. Finally, I had to interrupt her – mid-sentence. I noted that while these stories were true, I did not want to give the participants the impression that they were wide-spread. The next presenter thanked me for the clarification and immediately started his presentation.

I made this observation in my field notes, “This is the first time I have intervened in such a direct way. I feel terrible, but I had to do it. The PSLLC has worked so hard to create this program so that new folks do not experience these frustrations. And now, in the middle of the program, they are hearing stories of all the things that can go wrong. I can’t believe it.”

The session continued and the presenters finished their presentations without further incident. As we transitioned from the informational segment of the program to the social segment, we had to move everyone to another location. The logistical challenges provided a welcome distraction. As I borrowed chairs from other offices, Members 1 and 7 arranged the buffet. Members 4 and 11 organized people into small discussion groups, while Member 9 chatted with the special guest. Member 6 drew the
reclassified colleague aside for a private discussion of her concerns. Within a few minutes, everyone had a seat, a plate of food, and a conversation group.

At the end of the second hour of the session, Member 10 reminded the participants to complete the evaluation forms. Participants thanked the members for the program as they filed out of the room. The special guest chatted pleasantly with me as we cleaned the room. Although I still felt unsettled, I did not sense tension as the participants, the members, and the guest departed the session.

_Evaluating My Actions._

After the meeting, I reached out to three members of the PSLLC for their feedback on my handling of the critical incident. One member summarized the message she heard from the special guest and fully understood why I felt compelled to intervene. She said my first set of comments signaled that I respected this guest and was receptive to her input. The second set positioned the learning community’s materials as the focus of this meeting. She considered my comments to be firm, but not rude. And, personally, she was pleased that I stepped forward to retain the PSLLC’s control of the meeting. She thought that I handled the situation as well as anyone could.

The second member joked with me about the variety of leadership challenges in the fourth session. He noted that, from his perspective, the special guest’s comments were negative, not informative. He thought my comments were appropriate; I did not counter the special guest’s points, but I did provide some needed context. He did not have any suggestions for alternative actions.

And the third member noted that the special guest pointedly ignored my signals and continued to make negative comments. She considered the incident a power struggle
and was confident that all of the participants and the members understood why I stepped in to re-direct the conversation. She also thought that the PSLLC displayed a strong sense of teamwork in adjusting to the disruptions and in re-focusing on our intended program.

Assessing the Orientation Program

After these consultations, I turned my attention to the post-orientation tasks. In keeping with past practice, I distributed the evaluation data to the members of the PSLLC. I noticed that the group had presented the program to a total of 27 participants and suggested that we set aside time, before our Spring orientation session, to critically evaluate the program. And, I offered to conduct a preliminary analysis of the evaluation data to present at our next PSLLC meeting.

Participants’ Ratings of the Quality of the Program.

Table 8.1 presents the mean score for each aspect of the program by orientation session. The survey utilized a five point-scale (1 meant “poor” and 5 meant “excellent”). The scores from the first, second, and third sessions were consistent with my expectations. The scores for the first session were somewhat lower than the average across all four session. Once the PSLLC actually delivered the program, we gained insights that allowed us to strengthen the program.

The biggest surprise came from the participants in the fourth session. Despite the distractions, they all rated notification, usefulness, organization, and overall quality of the program as “excellent.” In addition, eight of the nine participants in this session rated the clarity as “excellent.”
Table 8.1

*Participant Evaluations of Selected Aspects of the Orientation Program*

<table>
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<th>Number of Participants</th>
<th>Notification</th>
<th>Usefulness</th>
<th>Clarity</th>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Overall Quality</th>
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</table>

Participants’ Written Comments.

I skimmed the written comments from the four sessions, looking for differences. Since the participants in the first two sessions were not necessarily “new” to the university, I wondered whether they might have a different perspective than our target audience. Their comments clustered into three broad topics. The first cluster, comments expressing appreciation for the orientation program, included: “great information,” “a wealth of information,” “this program is great,” and “thanks for your help and hard work.” The second cluster, comments stating the importance of providing this support early in a participant’s career, included: “I have been on campus for more than a year, so much of the information was redundant. But for new people, most of the information would be great,” “I have been employed here for 7 months and wish I had the information earlier,” and “keep doing this program so that new employees won’t be ‘on their own’ for their first two years, like I was.” And the third cluster, comments
suggesting improvement to the program, included adding page numbers to the orientation manual.

I also reviewed the comments from the participants in the third and the fourth sessions. I noticed that the feedback from this group was also quite positive. The three primary themes in this set of comments revolved around appreciation: appreciation for the information/orientation manual, appreciation for the opportunity to meet colleagues (both the members of the PSLLC and other new employees), and appreciation for the explanation of the recontracting process. The only suggestion for improvement was to allocate more time to each presenter.

Overall, the comments from the participants were positive and constructive. They provided valuable feedback on areas of interest to the participants (such recontracting, promotion, and the AFT, and the Senate) and identified topics and/or presentations in need of improvement (such as the AFT, the Senate, and employee benefits). One notable finding was that all of the participants reported that they would recommend the orientation program to a new colleague. This also reinforced the PSLLC’s sense of the need for this type of support.

PSLLC Members’ Comments on the Program.

I compared the participant evaluation data with the data I collected from the PSLLC members in one-on-one interviews. The participants’ appreciation for program itself aligned with the members’ pride in the program. As Member 2 stated, “Look at the surveys. The results are really good. That shows that the hard work the [learning community] put in worked… I think we hit everything – crossed all the T’s, dotted all the I’s – [the orientation participants] were more pleased, I think, than we even expected.”
Member 4 echoed Member 2’s pride in the PSLLC’s work. He recognized that the value of the project expanded beyond the initial set of orientation sessions. He noted, “As far as what we accomplished, it is great. …Obviously this [orientation program] is long overdue. It is something that we were waiting for …and, finally, we just realized that it is not going to happen unless we do something ourselves…It was just so necessary… – I think we did it really well…I think an excellent foundation has been laid…Because, not only did we get the program and the [orientation manual] established, but [the program] is something that is going to occur in the future. So it is not something that was a waste of time, or a waste of effort –something fruitful actually came out of it.”

Member 6 shared these sentiments and expressed a sense of personal ownership; “I know that I have felt like – wow! I think this is unique. It was a very ambitious thing to do. We are doing something that is totally different, it has not been done before. And it is making a difference…So that's empowering…because now we have the resources that can answer [the new professional staffs’] questions and help them…I really look at it as positive, because we are helping our colleagues. And we are giving them something that we never had, which is always a good thing. So, it is almost like trying to make something better for my kid than maybe I had.”

My Interpretation of the Data.

After reviewing the data from the participants and the members of the PSLLC, and considering my own impressions, I believed that the program was achieving most of the goals set by the PSLLC (see Table 7.2). For example, the orientation session met the goal of helping participants develop a professional network. At each session, the
participants were introduced to the members of the PSLLC and to the other participants. This contact is an initial step for building relationships outside of one’s office or building.

There was evidence that the program addressed the goal of reducing newcomers’ stress and confusion. Several of the “experienced” participants noted that these supports would have been particularly helpful during their first few months at Rowan, while the PSLLC members spoke to solving problems and providing supports that were not available in the past. There were also data to suggest that the program met the goal of explaining institutional norms. During the presentations, the PSLLC members explained university policies, described intuitional practices, and answered the participants’ questions. Participants’ written comments indicated their appreciation of the assistance in understanding university processes.

Furthermore, the program met the fourth goal, providing a “ready reference,” through the orientation manual. The participants clearly recognized the value of this resource. The only goal I could not evaluate was the one regarding equality with faculty. Given these positive findings, I was eager to discuss my preliminary analysis with the PSLLC.

Reconsidering the PSLLC Meeting Schedule

When I contacted the members of the PSLLC, in February 2008, to set a date to review the evaluation data, one offered a suggestion. He wondered if the PSLLC might try clustering our meetings around our thrice-a-year orientation sessions, rather than our traditional monthly meetings. As we talked about this idea, I understood his thinking. I contacted other members to hear their thoughts on this change.
Given the phase of the project, and the preferences of the group, the others agreed that short, intense bursts of focused work made more sense than monthly meetings. As one member pointed out, the group could do the development work in the Summer and then have a lighter load for the rest of the year. I worried that, with less-frequent meetings, members might lose interest in the project, but the others did not share my view. One explained that this project was meaningful to each individual member of the PSLLC. She was confident that the members’ pride in the project and commitment to the group would not diminish because of a change in our meeting schedule.

I was persuaded. When I asked a member for advice on introducing this change to the group, she suggested that I announce it at a PSLLC mini-meeting. She explained that a PSLLC mini-meeting was the name she had bestowed on the quick discussions I facilitate when I see a group of PSLLC members at non-PSLLC events. I had not noticed that I frequently conducted PSLLC business outside of our meetings, but thanked her for the suggestion. I was very surprised, a few days later, to discover that I really did hold mini-meetings. When I noticed that a number of the members were sitting at my table at an AFT meeting, I proposed the changes to our meeting schedule. The group seemed to like the idea and we completed that piece of business without holding a PSLLC meeting.

I made this entry in my journal, “After the AFT meeting, I walked back to my office with two members and was teased about mini-meeting. Apparently, I also make a number of ‘drop-in’ visits. I remembered that, in the first year of the PSLLC, I spent a lot of time talking with members who missed a meeting or had a concern. At first, I made special appointments and tried to keep everyone ‘in the loop’ through one-on-one
meetings. That was overwhelming, so I tried other strategies. And they worked. I guess I just integrated them into my usual routine – when I see someone from my group, I want to chat for a few minutes about the project, work, their kids.”

Preparing for the Fifth Orientation Session

In early May, I contacted the PSLLC to organize our next set of meetings. I included the key topics for discussion, namely the evaluation data and the running list of program enhancements. I offered the members a choice between longer meetings, which would include lunch, or shorter meetings, which would include a snack. Every member preferred the lunch meetings, which reinforced my perception that the members appreciated the social aspect of this group. So, I scheduled a lunch-time meeting for the week after commencement.

The Thirteenth Meeting.

The PSLLC met May 22, 2008. I opened the meeting with a discussion of the participants’ feedback from the evaluation instrument. As we talked about the findings, the members identified aspects of the program we could improve and I recorded these ideas on the white board. Later, we compared the items on the white board with our running list of program enhancements. One member suggested sorting the ideas into groups, in terms of priority. Just as we finished the sorting, a member joined the meeting. As I greeted her, I saw that something was wrong. Her face was red and her movements were tight; she was visibly distressed.

Fortunately, the pizza delivery arrived and I had a chance to check-in with this member. I learned that there had been a significant disagreement in her office that morning. I asked if she wanted to take a walk to talk about it, and she said that she was
happy to stay and talk with the whole PSLLC. Once everyone settled in their lunch, the member shared her story. Soon, others were talking about recent changes in their offices. As I listened to the members, my friends, describe their feelings, I realized that the PSLLC was much more than a group of people working on a collaborative project. Together, we formed a safe and a supportive place for members to bring their worries and their frustrations.

By the end of the meeting, our distressed member looked much better. She thanked the group for putting aside the planned agenda to talk about her day. Member 11 replied, “You matter more than any agenda.” And Member 6 noted, “We are all in this together. I think it was good for us to talk about the changes, because we can’t help the new folks figure it out if we are lost ourselves.” As the members filed out of the conference room, I reminded them that our next week was in two weeks.

After the Meeting.

I made this entry in my journal, “The PSLLC really is a caring group. It occurred to me that the PSLLC invests a lot of energy in building supports for the new hires. Today, as a group, we supported each other. [Member X] initiated this change. And, clearly, we can all use a little support… it was wonderful to see. I was impressed that everyone adjusted to the change in our plans. This is growth.”

I also spent some time organizing for our cluster of PSLLC meetings. The group was hosting the sixth orientation session in mid-June, so I created a master to-do list to help coordinate those preparations. We planned to meet every other week in June and July, so I confirmed the logistical details. And the meetings were meant to be work
sessions, so I consolidated my notes on the “high priority” projects. I distributed all of these materials to the members in an email.

The Fourteenth Meeting.

The PSLLC met again on June 3, 2008. The first part of this meeting revolved around our preparations for the upcoming orientation session. We talked about some minor revisions, like re-allocating the time allotted for the different sections of the presentation, adding new content to selected sections, and relegating some topics to the question-and-answer segment of the program. After a long discussion, the members agreed to institute the changes in the next session.

The second part of the meeting was social. As we munched on pizza, I asked one member about her recent trip across country. Her remarks led to another person’s tales of long distance traveling with his children. It was a funny, relaxed conversation. I learned more about the members’ families and their interests outside of work.

Hosting the Fifth Orientation Session

The fifth orientation session was held on June 12, 2008. With only four participants in attendance, the mood was relaxed. Several members interjected with “one more thing” or teased the presenters, which contributed to the conversational-feel. Though the PowerPoint presentation was available, most of the presenters did not use it. Once one presenter returned to her previous practice, of sitting with the participants and thumbing through her section of the manual as she spoke, the subsequent presenters followed her example. I noted that the presenters seemed more comfortable without the slides.
After the Orientation Session.

I entered the evaluation data into the spreadsheet and distributed the information to the members of the PSLLC. Again, the feedback was positive. All of the participants rated the usefulness, clarity, organization and overall quality of the presentation as excellent. The comments were positive as well. The participants liked that the session had an “informal atmosphere, yet [was] professionally organized and presented” and that “everything was explained to me in detail, rather than just handed to me in the form of pamphlets and handouts.” They also appreciated the “opportunity to meet new people and form some relationships with contacts for the future.” All four would recommend the session to a colleague.

The Fifteenth, Sixteenth, and Seventeenth Meetings

The next three PSSLC were among our most informal. In the June 17th meeting, we reviewed the participants’ feedback from the last orientation session and our own impressions. I added this note to my journal, “Member 4 commented, right in the middle of our discussion, that Member 11 handled her presentation particularly well. She smiled, thanked him, and commented on how much she appreciated the efforts of another member - who prepared the room for the meeting, and laid out the buffet, and kept the operation running. An unsung hero, she said.” I concluded my reflection by noting, “The group was totally nonchalant about recognizing and acknowledging each other’s contributions. What a fantastic, unexpected, and magical moment - this might be my favorite part of this experience.”

We then moved on to the small group projects. We decided to concentrate on three major enhancements: a follow-up survey for orientation participants, a PowerPoint
resource with photographs of the key buildings and locations on campus, and a discussion of the feasibility of moving the orientation materials to a web-based format. Again, we formed small groups.

The members conversed quietly in their groups until lunch, when we reconvened as a large group. Members chatted with their neighbors until Member 6 asked me for the topic of the day. I had not prepared an agenda or a discussion topic. Member 2 suggested that we discuss our summer vacation plans. This was an excellent choice; after learning that several members would not be available for our meeting on July 1 PSLLC meeting, we cancelled that work session.

At the end of the meeting, one member approached me with her concerns regarding the paperless orientation program. I offered to ask the web-based group to be prepared to talk about these issues at the next meeting. The member thought that sounded like a good idea. At the end of the week, I made a visit to one member’s office with a list of topics pertaining to the web-based orientation materials. We agreed that it was important to include the entire PSLLC in these decisions.

The PSLLC met again on July 15. Only six of the ten members were able to attend, but the small size of the group allowed everyone to participate in the discussions. The main topic in this work session pertained to the work of the web-based group. We listed the advantages of the paper manual and the web-based resource. We talked about the key considerations and the primary obstacles related to the transition to an online format. Several members expressed their commitment to retaining the “strongest” aspects of the orientation program, which included: building an on-campus network (by meeting the other new employees and the members of the PSLLC), learning about the
significant policies and procedures, and connecting with experienced colleagues. The small group clearly shared this commitment. We reached a consensus; the PSSLC agreed to recreate the manual in an online format, utilize the new format for a trial period, and revisit the decision after the trial period.

I was pleased with this result and asked the group to reflect on our decision-making process. From my perspective, this discussion touched on some deeply held values. And, yet, it was collegial and warm. The members had similar perceptions. Member 4 made an interesting observation; he recognized that the thoughtful people in this group might notice factors he had overlooked. He was willing to be persuaded by someone else’s stronger thinking. Member 11 appreciated that she could express a different point of view. The members nodded in agreement.

And the 17th, and final, PSSLC meeting in this cluster was July 29, 2008. It was another small group work session. Toward the end of the meeting, I noted that it was time to set the dates for the orientation sessions for next academic year. I asked if the group was ready to talk about ending the PSSLC and passing our project on to another group. One member reflected on the history of this project and how much the PSSLC had accomplished. Another suggested that we postpone this decision until the small groups completed the follow-up survey and the website projects. The group seemed to agree with this suggestion, so I suggested that we set the dates.

Preparing for the Sixth Orientation Session

I contacted the PSSLC, in late September, to prepare for the sixth orientation session. The group elected to organize via email and I distributed our usual lists. The web-based group reported that it would not complete its work in time for the October
session, so we made arrangements to update and to construct the paper-based manual. The members volunteered for the different orientation tasks. We were on track, until I was assigned to staff a work-related meeting that conflicted with the orientation session. I asked the group for recommendations and they decided to host the session as planned.

Hosting the Sixth Orientation Session

The sixth orientation session was October 17, 2008. It included six participants, two of whom were long-time employees who had recently been reclassified to AFT positions. These two participants were unusually vocal and interrupted the presenters to make comparisons between the AFT and their previous union. I joined the session late, but I could see that they were impacting the tone and the flow of the presentations. While I was deciding whether to intervene, another participant asked the others to hold their comments.

During lunch, while Member 4 asked the participants for their thoughts on a paperless orientation program, I apologized to the participant who had spoken to the talkative participants for the disruptions. The participant waved off my apology, but I made a note to talk with the PSLLC about disruptive participants.

After the Orientation Session

After the participants and most of the PSLLC returned to work, a few members and I remained to tidy the conference room. We talked about the disruptions and the effect they had on the event. One member commented that since I usually maintained order during our sessions, it was not clear who was to intervene (since I was not present). Another noted that she was not sure how to manage a disruptive participant. I offered a few ideas and noted it was an uncomfortable thing to do.
The following day, I distributed the results to the members and scheduled a PSLLC meeting for mid-November. I asked the small groups to be prepared to discuss their projects. And, I worked with the follow-up survey group to complete the draft instrument and outline a plan for administering the survey.

Completing the Enhancement Projects

For the balance of this cycle, the PSLLC focused on completing the program enhancement projects. The follow-up survey was the major topic at the group’s 18th meeting on November 11, 2008. The small group presented the draft instrument and a timeline for administering the survey, which the PSLLC endorsed.

Follow-Up Survey.

The PSLLC invited all of the orientation participants to complete a follow-up survey (Appendix E). In mid-November, I distributed the survey, via email and inter-office mail, to the 37 colleagues who had attended an orientation session. Twenty people completed the survey by December 1, for a response rate of 54.05%.

In an effort to encourage participation, the respondents were anonymous. The survey addressed four broad areas: the content of the orientation, networking and meeting colleagues, the delivery of the program, and written comments. In terms of content, the first question probed the past participant’s use of the orientation manual since attending the orientation session. Table 8.2 presents the results. Seventy percent of the respondents referred to the manual at least once. Of the six respondents who had not referred to the manual since the orientation session, two offered these comments, “It was useful to read through when I first got it; even though I have not read it since, is still has value” and “I have not looked at it because the training covered everything!”
Table 8.2

Number of Times the Participants Consulted the Orientation Manual

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0 times</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>30.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-2 times</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>55.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-4 times</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 4 times</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We asked the past participants which sections of the manual they had consulted. Table 8.3 presents these data. Of the 18 respondents who reported consulting the manual, two-thirds referred to the section on recontracting. This was consistent with the PSLLC’s expectations. Since all of the respondents were in the early years of their careers at the time of this survey, we assumed that they would be interested in the materials directly related to the university’s performance evaluation process.

Fewer than half of the respondents consulted the other sections. We noted some interest in career/professional development opportunities and promotional opportunities. These topics would probably be useful to a past participant further along in his or her career.

Table 8.3

Sections of the Orientation Manual Consulted

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recontracting</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>66.67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career/Professional Development</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>44.44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Federation of Teachers</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>38.89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotional Opportunities</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>27.78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee Perks</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>27.78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History and Organizational Structure</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11.11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In terms of networking and meeting colleagues, we asked if the orientation session provided an opportunity to expand one’s on-campus professional network. Of the 19 responses, 100% were affirmative. We asked whether the past participants viewed the colleagues they met during the orientation session as resources for advice and assistance. Of the 19 responses, 17 (89.47%) were affirmative. And we asked whether the past participants had reached out to any of these colleagues for advice or assistance. Of the 19 responses, 12 (63.16%) had contacted a colleague.

The survey included an item on the delivery of the orientation program. The respondents did not express a clear preference; eight of the 20 respondents recommended electronic delivery, while seven recommended print delivery. Although not a response option, 25% of the respondents recommended both methods of delivery.

The survey also included an item on the timing of the orientation program. As evident in Table 8.4, there was a strong preference for delivering the program within the new employee’s first three months of service. The ideal time frame, according to 57.89% of respondents, was in the first month of service.

Table 8.4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants' Preferred Time Frame for Orientation Session</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time Frame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During First Month of Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During First 3 Months of Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During First 6 Months of Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During First 12 Months of Service</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The survey also included space for comments. While one-third of respondents did not provide additional feedback, many did. Most of the comments praised the manual and thanked the PSLLC for creating the orientation program. One of the memorable comments was, “Thank you! For a new employee, Rowan can be a large, cold, and scary place. This sort of programming was very helpful!!” Another was, “Thank you for creating this program. Your first session was held 18 months after I was hired …my first year at Rowan was difficult …it was great to meet other ‘newbies.’ Keep up the good work. We need to build a strong network of professional staff.”

Interpretations of Findings.

I conducted the preliminary analysis and met with the follow-up survey group to talk about the results. Together we wrote a one-page summary for the PSLLC to highlight key findings. We noted that the past participants valued the orientation program. They tended to utilize the resources related to early-career needs, such as the information on recontracting and career development. They recommended delivering the program early in a participants’ career, but were divided over the preferred mode of delivery. The written comments expressed an appreciation for the program and signaled that the orientation program was a worthwhile project. Overall, these results suggested that the orientation was meeting the goals set by the PSLLC.

The Transition to Web-Based Content

Since the PSLLC was housed under the auspices of the AFT, we requested permission to post our materials on the union’s website. The web-based group initiated
talks with the AFT office staff in September 2008 and I joined the group in December 2008. I organized a series of short meetings and secured project approval from the AFT president. Then, we consulted with the AFT’s volunteer webmaster and learned that, due to a planned change to another service provider, our project would be delayed until March 2009.

The Nineteenth Meeting

The PSLLC met on January 7, 2009. It was a busy meeting; the follow-up survey group presented its key findings and the web-based group discussion the obstacles it had encountered. As we considered our next steps with the web-based enhancement, I reintroduced the idea of terminating the PSLLC. Since the web-based group expected to finish its work by the end of the semester, we planned to transition the project to another group in May 2009. We spend some time generating ideas to facilitate the transition and formed to small group to develop these ideas. And, during the last segment of the meeting, the members of the PSLLC completed an evaluation of the learning community experience.

Assessing the PSLLC Experience

One significant question to emerge in the course of this project was whether this group was, in fact, a learning community. As discussed in Chapter I, Cox (2004b) identifies 10 qualities that distinguish his learning communities from other types of groups. These qualities are: safety and trust, openness, respect, responsiveness, collaboration, relevance, challenge, enjoyment, esprit de corps, and empowerment (Cox, 2004b). In order to study these qualities, in the context of the PSLLC, I created a short evaluation survey (Appendix F).
The PSLLC Evaluation Survey.

The evaluation survey consisted of 14 statements and five short answer items. I wrote these statements based on Cox’s description of the 10 qualities. I was interested in the members’ sense of the importance of these qualities and their satisfaction with those elements. Therefore, the members were asked to respond to each statement twice; one response pertaining to the importance of the quality (on a five-point scale, 1 meant “very unimportant” and 5 meant “very important”) and one response pertaining to his or her satisfaction (on a five-point scale, 1 meant “very unsatisfied” and 5 meant “very satisfied”). The results (means) are presented Table 8.5.

Table 8.5.

Members’ Assessments of the Learning Community Experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualities in the Learning Community Experience</th>
<th>Importance</th>
<th>Satisfaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I believe that members of the learning community developed the trust necessary for the participants to connect with each other.</td>
<td>4.70</td>
<td>4.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I believe that the members of the learning community developed the openness necessary for the participants to share their thoughts without fear of retribution.</td>
<td>4.60</td>
<td>4.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I believe that the members of the learning community developed the mutual respect necessary for the participants to coalesce as a group.</td>
<td>4.80</td>
<td>4.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I believe that the members of the learning community developed the responsiveness necessary for participants to be respectful of each others’ concerns and preferences.</td>
<td>4.80</td>
<td>4.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I believe that the members of the learning community developed the spirit of collaboration necessary for participants to engage in productive discussions.</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>4.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I believe that the members of the learning community developed the appreciation for differences and that participants to feel their unique experiences are valued.</td>
<td>4.70</td>
<td>4.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement</td>
<td>Rating 1</td>
<td>Rating 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I believe that the members of the learning community developed the group’s direction and goals.</td>
<td>4.70</td>
<td>4.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I believe that the facilitator directed the learning community’s work.</td>
<td>4.60</td>
<td>4.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I believe that the learning community’s project is relevant to newly hired professional staff, librarians, and coaches.</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>5.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I believe that the members of the learning community can take pride in the quality of the product the group produced.</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>4.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I believe that the time and the effort the members of the learning community invested in the group was worthwhile.</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>5.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I believe that the learning community experience included opportunities for relationship building.</td>
<td>4.80</td>
<td>4.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I believe that the members of the learning community developed a sense of commitment to the group.</td>
<td>4.80</td>
<td>4.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I believe that being part of the learning community has increased the participants’ sense of their ability to bring about change at Rowan University.</td>
<td>4.60</td>
<td>4.20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, the members’ considered all 10 qualities to be important to the learning community experiences. The ratings also suggest that the members were generally satisfied with these aspects of the experience. These findings are supported by the written comments. Members were asked to compare their experiences with the learning community to their experiences with other university committees. Their responses can be organized around three themes: inter-personal relationships, sense of accomplishment, and the work process.

For example, one respondent described the interpersonal relationships that developed within the group in this way: "I felt more connected to the learning community than to most other university committees. I developed closer relations to the members"
and felt we accomplished what we set out to do - successfully.” Another touched on this idea in an indirect manner. He or she wrote, “This was much more fun than being part of other committees.”

Several respondents mentioned the sense of accomplishment or fulfillment they felt as a result of this experience. Sample comments include: “The learning community experience has been a lot more time intensive but the pay off has been much greater. This has given me a real and concrete sense of accomplishment, whereas work on other committees often yielded little satisfaction and/or tangible benefits;” “I have accomplished something positive as a member of the learning community. I was a member of [a university committee] and it didn't make any changes. There were many discussions concerning change, but nothing concrete was accomplished;” “This experience was much better than other committees because we actually accomplished something;” and “The learning community’s finished product leads to a sense of fulfillment, whereas most committees only seem to be a waste of time.”

And three respondents mentioned the learning community’s work process. Two addressed the role of the facilitator. One wrote, "One major difference was that the facilitator was just that, and not controlling the process, the way some committee chairs tend to do.” Another echoed this sentiment; “I liked that we [the members of the PSLLC] set our own direction, rather than having a chair who knew the ‘answer’ before the group met!” A third respondent spoke to the skills needed to engage in this type of process. He or she wrote, “For this committee to work well together, you must have the ability to listen and communicate your thoughts effectively.”
Importance of the Qualities.

The data indicate that the members considered all 10 qualities to be important in the learning community experience. The mean scores ranged between 4.6 and 5.0 on the five-point scale. Thus, the mean score for every quality was above 4.0 (somewhat important).

While all of the qualities were important, some were very important. In fact, all 10 members of the PSLLC rated these four qualities as very important: developing a spirit of collaboration for engaging in productive discussions, developing a project that is relevant to new employees, feeling a sense of pride in the quality of the final product, and feeling that the time and the effort invested in the project was worthwhile. In addition, two of these qualities, developing a project that is relevant to new employees and feeling that the time and the effort invested in the project was worthwhile, also earned very satisfied ratings from all of the participants. These ratings were consistent with the members’ responses to the short answer items.

When asked to describe a positive aspect of the learning community experience, one respondent wrote, “the people, mission, and outcomes of the community.” Other members shared these sentiments. Some described the group’s accomplishment. For example, one wrote, “A positive aspect has been experiencing the feeling of accomplishment.” Two members mentioned “the sense of accomplishment from creating a finished product that has value” and the satisfaction from “succeeding in developing a finished product which all members can be proud of.”

Some members responded to this prompt by describing the experience of working with the other members of the PSLLC. One respondent wrote, “It felt good to have a
group of people working together to address this problem and to fill these gaps. I like the idea of improving conditions for those who come behind me.” Two mentioned “working together for a common goal of helping new professional staff” and “helping others on campus” as positive aspects of the experience.

Satisfaction with the Qualities.

The survey data indicate greater variability in the members’ level of satisfaction with the learning community experience. The mean scores for the qualities ranged between 4.2 and 5.0 on the five-point scale. Again, the mean score for every quality was above 4.0 (somewhat satisfied)

Some qualities were reported to be very satisfying by at least nine of the 10 members. These qualities were: being responsive to each others’ concerns, appreciating the unique experiences of each member, developing a project that is relevant to new employees, feeling a sense of pride in the quality of the final product, feeling that the time and the effort invested in the project was worthwhile, and having opportunities to build relationships with other members of the group. These numerical ratings were also compatible with the member’s written comments to the short answer items on the survey.

For example, when asked for a short description of his or her strongest memory of the learning community experience, several members wrote about the relationships that developed within the PSLLC. One respondent wrote, “There came a point where the learning community started to joke around and tease each other. There was a lot more laughter, a sense of friendship. It felt like this is my group. We are really in this together.” Two others expanded on this point; one mentioned "connecting with other professional staff members…I believe a strong and lasting network was formed” and the
other wrote “meeting the community members, interacting with each members, and greeting them at University functions” as some of the strongest memories of the experience.

Another member recalled providing assistance to our newest colleagues. One described “looking at the faces of our 'new hires' going through the orientation sessions. I can remember seeing one or two people looking apprehensive. I remember other members smiling and looking comfortable during the lunch and mingle part.” Another remarked on the satisfaction of “providing information to new hires and giving them colleagues that were ready and available to help them.”

And a third group had strong memories of the learning community’s process. Four respondents wrote about the collaboration. They described “the all-inclusive and collaborative nature of the group,” “the exchange with others from different segments of the Rowan community,” “the whiteboards outlining where the learning community wanted to go and developing the strategy to get there,” and “the point of reaching consensus, as a team, regarding the orientation session and materials.” Another referred to the experience of ”working together to construct the manuals for the first two orientations,” which was certainly an experience I will never forget!

*Comparing Importance and Satisfaction Ratings.*

I was curious about the statements with the largest differences between the mean importance and satisfaction ratings. The first instance was the statement regarding the sense of commitment to the learning community. The respondents rated commitment as quite important (4.80), yet their satisfaction was 4.30. The written comments describing a negative aspect of the learning community experience might explain this finding. One
noted that “seeing some folks not following through on their commitments, or worse, 
backing away completely after spending time early on providing their comments or 
opinions, and then not being there in the end to follow through” was disappointing. He or 
she could have been referring to the loss of two original members in Cycle 3 and/or the 
distribution of the workload.

Two other members addressed the distribution of the workload in their comments 
on a negative aspect of the experience. One wrote, “Not all of the members of the group 
did their fair share of work. That was kind of disappointing - talk but no action.”

Another noted the “occasional unequal sharing of time and task responsibilities by some 
community members” was frustrating. While I can empathize with the sense of 
frustration, I do not have evidence of a habitual problem with any of the active members.

The second instance of a notable difference between the mean importance and 
satisfaction ratings was the ability to bring about change at Rowan University. The 
respondents’ mean rating for the importance of this quality was 4.60, while the 
satisfaction was 4.20. This finding was difficult to interpret; I did not find any 
information in the written comments to explain this finding. In fact, several written 
comments emphasized the respondent’s pride in creating an orientation program and his 
or her satisfaction derived from working together to create this support to help other 
colleagues.

*Obstacles to Participation.*

I included two short answer items on obstacles that affect participation in a 
learning community. One item asked for the challenges and obstacles the respondent had 
encountered him- or herself, while the second asked for his or her sense of the challenges
encountered by other members of the PSLLC. The dominant themes were time and changes in work assignments. Sample comments include: “time,” “scheduling conflicts,” “time constraints,” “increased workload and more pressed for time,” “additional job responsibilities and too little time,” and “new work responsibilities that take time.”

Two respondents referenced time, workload, and a third factor, campus culture. One wrote, “There has been a definite shift in culture at the University - greater commitment of time for required job duties (and volume of duties) and some people may not feel they can take time away without fear of retribution.” The other described “a lack of time and a colder environment here at Rowan” as obstacles to participation.

Other Comments.

I included space in the survey for comments on any aspect of the experience. Four respondents provided a comment. The first wrote, “This committee has been a great experience.” Two others made similar observations, “I enjoyed this project and working with this group. It was a good way to generate ideas, collect different perspectives, and share the workload” and “I enjoyed all aspects of this experience and would hope to become involved in something similar in the future.” And the fourth wrote, “I count this experience among my most valued experiences at Rowan. It has given me a true sense of accomplishment. I made a difference!”

Comparing the Survey Results to the Interview Data.

I compared the survey results with the data I collected from the one-on-one interviews with the members of the learning community. I was particularly interested in
data regarding the PSLLC’s work process, the desire for results, and building relationships.

_The PSLLC’s Work Process._

The interview data were consistent with the survey data; the members believed that the learning community experience was different from a traditional committee experience. One distinction was that the members set the group’s direction. Member 2, for example, told me, “When working on a regular committee, [the committee is] basically steered towards one direction. With the Learning Community, we talk about ourselves and our own opinions on things. [The members of the PSLLC had] controlled the end result… I think that [the PSLLC] actually produced a better the end result because the people really know each other and were willing to work together.”

Member 4 also referred to the group’s self-direction. His comments on storytelling and the development of the orientation program point out as second distinction, collaboration. He said, “Definitely. I did feel that [the PSLLC was different from other groups]… It allowed input from a variety of individuals. We got to hear the stories - good or bad and whatever. And all of that … is important, especially with this project… From those stories, we could then go forward and make sure that the necessary aspects were covered in the orientation… So [the stories were] always helpful.”

Member 7 expanded on the ideas of self-direction and collaboration in her comments. She introduced the third distinction, the notion of power-sharing. She said, “One thing that made this really nice was there was [not] a pecking order … [or any] jockeying for power and position… It was a very equal experience… [Kate was] the facilitator, but there was no alpha member of the group.”
And one of Member 2’s comments seemed to encapsulate the distinctions between the PSLLC and other groups. He said, “Our community developed a culture. We worked together. We had nice conversations. We got things done. That is what it is all about. I think we operated as a learning community should. We did not make it as a party every time – every session was a very properly executed work session. We did really good work, I think.”

The Desire for Results.

The survey data communicate the members’ strong interest in producing results. The interview data provide some insight into the reasons for this and describe the members’ thinking during the early phases of the PSLLC. One member told me, “I think - this is such a touchy issue – that people like to talk and talk. And complain and complain. And then they don’t do anything. So initially, the fact that it just seemed like we were talking, and nothing was getting done, was frustrating. But once we started getting closer to the deadline, I started seeing more results. At the end, people came together and it got done very effectively.” Another member said this, “I would not say it was frustrating, but the group had a slow start. I think figuring out what we were doing, and mapping a plan, took a while…It was just kind of slow while we were gearing up for what we were going to do. Once we got going, it was like – ‘oh, now we have too much to do.’” When I heard this concern in a third interview, I decided to explore the issue in greater detail.

I asked Member 6 to describe his recollections from the early days of the project. He spoke with considerable enthusiasm as he recalled, “[Planning the orientation program] was absolutely empowering and it certainly will make a difference. We are
talking about something that has never been done before. That's empowering – we created something that has never been done before...Well, we've got a specific plan. It is not just talking off the cuff.”

I told him that other (unnamed) members had mentioned some frustration with the group’s “slow start.” He nodded. I asked if, at any point, he suspected that the PSLLC would be just another committee. Though he did not provide a definitive answer, his response suggested that interpersonal relationships were a significant factor in the project. He said, “Kate, you thought of the learning community… You brought these people together…I like you, we are friends... You get along with people …And that is why you are able to do this, Kate. Because you have served on committees, and have been in a leadership type position, and those things - networks, contacts, serving on committees- …that's what helped with this.”

**Building Relationships.**

Member 6’s comments were one indication of the importance of relationships in the PSLLC. Two members spoke about friendship. Member 2 said, “Everybody worked very well together and I was very pleased with the camaraderie and the sense of community we have established… I was looking to network, but now I see that we are kind of friends as well.” Member 4 also referred to friendships. He said, “I always enjoy getting together with the group. While I may I disagree with a certain person’s viewpoint, or whatever, I never dislike the person. Friends can discuss things. I just enjoy learning about other people in general – their jobs, their experiences, their concerns, and stuff like that.”
In the interviews, other members linked their new relationships with the other members of the PSLLC with learning. One member reflected, “I learned a lot about the different functions of the other areas of the university, which I do not think I ever would have had any access to without the [opportunity to work with different colleagues through the] learning community.” Another said, “It was certainly helpful [to work with a diverse group]…because of the things others contribute. I was not aware of all the differences out there.” And a third noted, “I learned a lot from working on a collaborative project across different offices and areas. Really, my work is very solitary. So this collaborative venture was something different … and kind of fun.”

Interpretation of Findings.

After analyzing the survey data, the interview data, and my own observations, I concluded that the 10 qualities that distinguish Cox’s (2004a, 2004b) learning communities from other groups were evident in the PSLLC experience. Overall, the numeric rating data, the short answer data, and the interview data pointed to a consistent message: the PSLLC met Cox’s definition of a learning community. In addition, these qualities contributed to the formation of a distinct organizational space for the PSLLC’s problem solving and relationship building activities.

Hosting the Seventh Orientation Session

The seventh orientation session, on January 15, 2009, was the last to utilize the paper-based orientation manual. Of the five participants, two were mid-career professionals coming from private industry. The differences between the corporate environment and the academic environment are considerable; naturally, these participants had many questions. I made this observation in my field notes, “It takes time to adjust to
Rowan’s culture and our community’s ways of working. One participant seems particularly frustrated and perplexed. She is asking for very detailed information on university policies. Member 11 is now sitting with this participant, literally turning the pages of the manual and patiently pointing to sentences. So far, everything the participant has asked for is in the orientation manual.

This participant was somewhat disruptive. However, once Member 11 was at her side to answer specific questions, the presenters were able to move through the materials. During the question and answer segment of the program, the participant described the difficulties she encountered in trying to gather information on her own. She thanked the PSLLC for compiling the resources and for developing a level of expertise on the university’s policies and practices.

After the Orientation Session

After the session, two members and I held a mini-meeting to compare our impressions of the day’s events. Dozens of colleagues had participated in the program, but only one had prompted us to consider our work from that participant’s perspective. We talked about the challenges the participant posed and the extent that the PSLLC met those challenges. The first challenge pertained to content. Fortunately, the orientation manual covered a wide range of topics; we did not see a need to add more materials.

The second challenge pertained to timing. Clearly this participant had been struggling on her own long enough to become frustrated; perhaps our thrice-a-year schedule should be re-visited. The third pertained to method of delivery. The participant seemed to respond to written policies and printed materials. Had we used a web-based format, she might have had a different reaction. A member suggested that we continue to
distribute printed copies of selected documents when we transitioned to the web-based version of the program.

And the fourth challenge pertained to the members’ expertise. The members of the PSLLC had developed in-depth knowledge of university processes due to service in leadership roles and service on professional staff committees. As the group prepared to pass the project to another group, it would be important to ensure that expertise was not lost.

Preparing for the Eighth Orientation Session

Unfortunately, the plan to move the AFT website to a private service provider was delayed several months. At the end of the Spring 2009 semester, the web-based small group met with the AFT office staff to re-focus attention on this project. Additional obstacles delayed the project. The PSLLC rescheduled our June orientation session for July and the website became operational just in time for the eighth orientation session.

Hosting the Eighth Orientation Session

The eighth orientation session was held on July 15, 2009. Members were excited to introduce a long-awaited program enhancement, web-based orientation materials. The four participants, some of whom worked in information technology, were invited to view the orientation material online, using laptops, during the presentations. Unfortunately, the debut of the web-based materials was not as successful as we hoped. Mis-labeled links, web-surfing participants, and uncomfortable presenters compromised the organization and the clarity of the session.
After the Orientation Session

Given the technological difficulties, the evaluation data were surprisingly positive. The information technology professionals offered some tips in the written comments. And all four participants indicated that they would recommend the program to a new colleague.

When I distributed the evaluation results, I also arranged a meeting for the web-based small group to continue our work. Completing the website was the last major task in this action cycle. The web-based group consulted with the AFT office over the remainder of the Summer. In early September 2009, when the web-based orientation materials became accessible, Cycle 4 drew to an end.

Summary of Cycle 4

This cycle spanned the second, third, and the beginning of the fourth years of the project, the period between the launch of the orientation program and the termination of the PSLLC. It described our process for conducting the major activities in the phase of the project, namely hosting, assessing, enhancing, and institutionalizing the orientation program. It outlined the challenges, like responding to disruptive orientation participants, and the rewards, like developing closer working relationships with others in PSLLC, associated with the experience. And, it marked the first steps in the termination of the PSLLC.

Findings.

The activities in this cycle contributed to the exploration of the four research questions at the center of this study.
Research Question 1.

My conversations with Frances helped to illuminate the differences between the PSLLC and the other learning communities in Rowan’s pilot program. The PSLLC was organized as a project-based learning community. Unlike Cox’s cohort-based groups, the PSLLC was not formed because the members shared common experiences. It was formed because the members wanted others to have the possibility of common experiences. That is, the PSLLC organized around a collaborative project. This project, the creation of an orientation program, aimed to bridge critical information gaps, and to support our newest colleagues’ acclimation to the Rowan community.

Frances suggested that these features contributed to the success of the PSLLC. She saw that the project allowed the members’ to reflect on their own experiences, to identify key issues, and to build the orientation program that would address those issues. The members could leverage their frustrations to create supports for others. Frances also saw the group’s goal of hosting the pilot orientation sessions in March 2007 as an asset. Our project had real-world application; we were striving to produce a tangible product (the orientation manual) by a specific deadline. In her view this contributed to the strong sense of accountability and commitment she observed in the interactions of the PSLLC members.

There is evidence that the members of the PSLLC members shared Frances’ perceptions. Several PSLLC members alluded to these points in the one-on-one interviews. And, data from the PSLLC evaluation survey convey the pride the members derived from producing a high quality, relevant program for their peers.
While these features contributed to the success of the project, they also introduced some degree of ambiguity. One significant issue was whether the group was, in fact, a learning community. Another was the challenge of ensuring that orientation content reflected the continual changes within our academic community. And a third issue was finding a way to end the PSLLC without terminating the orientation program.

Research Question 2.

The data collected through observations, reflections, interviews, and surveys provided further indication that the PSLLC experience was meeting the goals the members had set. As the project continued, there was evidence that the members were experiencing benefits beyond our original expectations. For example, one unexpected outcome was the emergence of close working relationships, even friendships, within our group. These ties were evident in the members’ interaction at PSLLC meetings, our orientation sessions, and University activities and events. Members described their feelings of affiliation in interviews and in the short-answer sections of the PSLLC evaluation survey. Even the orientation participants commented on the warmth and camaraderie within our group.

A second unexpected outcome was the level of trust the members extend to one another. I listened to members share their stories, in Cycles 3 and 4, and was struck by their willingness to talk about their struggles and frustrations. As this cycle continued, the members knew that our group meetings offered a place to talk about changes in our academic community. Together, we created a safe environment and we provided advice, alternative perspectives, and moral support to each other.
A third unexpected outcome was the degree of pride the members derived from the project. The interview data and the survey data provide strong evidence of the members’ satisfaction with our orientation program and pleasure with the opportunity to provide this service to others. Although the project required a significant commitment of time and effort, the PSLLC, as a whole, was empowered by the experience.

And a fourth unexpected outcome was the adoption of a different way of working with a group. In this cycle, the more moderate pace of work allowed the PSLLC to utilize a highly collaborative process. Without specific deadlines to meet, the members had time to listen to others, to recognize the talents and the contributions of other, and to blend members’ complementary skill sets. Some members spoke of power-sharing, while others described a spirit of collaboration and a tradition of setting our own direction.

Research Question 3.

The data collected in this cycle also reinforced the sense that the project was meeting the goals outlined in Cycle 3. The participants who responded to the follow-up survey clearly appreciated the PSLLC’s effort to create the orientation program and the group’s willingness to provide support to our newest colleagues. Responses to both the evaluation survey and the follow-up survey indicated that the new hires recognized the value of the information in the orientation manual and the opportunity to start to build an on-campus professional network.

Research Question 4.

As the tasks of the PSLLC change and the dynamics within the group evolved, my role shifted. In Cycle 3, my contributions were tied, in large part, to establishing the
group. I recognized an opportunity, proposed the group, recruited members for the PSLLC, and outlined a broad-based topic as the focus of our work. I had a significant role in promoting and encouraging the collaborative climate within the group. And, I relied on my project management skills to support the group in meeting key deadlines.

In this cycle, I was involved in more relationship-focused activities. My role, as the facilitator of the PSLLC, was to offer the group resources and processes to actualize its shared vision. This required me to serve, on occasion, as the designated “bad guy.” The PSLLC relied on me to intervene when colleagues outside of our group disrupted the orientation sessions or had a negative impact on the project. These were not easy tasks, but my commitment to the group and to our project compelled me to accept the responsibility.

And I came to see that these uncomfortable encounters were, in fact, learning experiences. They presented opportunities for me to step out of my distress and practice new skills. I had the confidence to address these situations because I knew, from past PSLLC meetings, that other members possessed the skill to manage the disturbance. If I faltered, I trusted that specific members would willingly provide assistance. This knowledge motivated me to take on a challenging situation; the risk was diminished because I had the support of my group.

One of my duties was to identify an end-point for the PSLLC. The group continued on beyond the pilot year because we wished to institute a number of program enhancements. The pace of the work was influenced, in large part, by factors outside of the group’s control. University hiring patterns could not justify more than three orientation sessions per year, so the PSLLC had a limited number of opportunities to
experiment with new ideas. And, some of the enhancements required the cooperation of collaborators outside of our group. We discovered that we had little influence over others’ priorities and waited months for our website partners to complete key aspects of the project. Eventually, the group completed its major projects. Although we had a list of additional enhancements, I proposed transitioning our project to another group.

Considerations for Cycle 5

As this cycle drew to a close, and the members of the PSLLC prepared to end the group, there were a number of outstanding questions. One question pertained to the future hosts of the orientation program. The PSLLC had been formed because none of the existing units or groups on campus provided this service. We would have to form a new group to carry on this work.

The second question pertained to the connections between groups that serve professional staff interests. The PSLLC had addressed this need informally, as several members were also active on the recontracting committee, the AFT executive committee, the professional development grant committee, and the university Senate. In addition, a number of PSLLC members held elected professional staff leadership positions during the years of this project. While these informal linkages had been valuable in facilitating and coordinating of the various groups’ activities, a new system was needed.

And the third significant question pertained to the future of initiatives and project ideas the PSLLC had not implemented.
CHAPTER IX

Cycle 5: Ending the PSLLC and Transitioning the Orientation Program to Another Group

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the final year of the Professional Staff and Librarian Learning Community (PSLLC) experience. As we prepared to conclude our group, we reflected on the contributions the PSLLC made to the health of our community. In addition to developing and hosting the orientation sessions, the members had served on various search committees, AFT working groups, and short-term projects. Through these activities, the PSLLC members were in regular contact with other professional staff colleagues and became aware of concerns that were beyond the scope of our orientation program. However, our group had the knowledge (based on the diversity of perspectives within the PSLLC), the skills (based on our practice of discussion-based, collaborative processes), and the commitment required to analyze these types of complex issues. We did invest time and effort to finding solutions to these broader problems. As we prepared to end the PSLLC group, we wondered which group or groups might fulfill these functions.

Overview of Cycle 5

This section presents a brief overview of the goals, the major activities, timeline, and data collection strategies in this cycle.
Goals and Major Activities.

The primary goal of this phase of the project entailed the transition of responsibility for the orientation program and the PSLLC’s other function to another group. The significant activities in this period, September 2009 to June 2010 include: creating a transition plan, forming the new orientation committee, forming a professional staff advisory committee, moving through the steps of the transition, and ending the PSLLC.

Cycle 5 Timeline.

![Cycle 5 Timeline](image)

*Figure 9.1. Cycle 5 (September 2009 – June 2010)*

Data Collection.

During Cycle 5, I collected data through note taking and journaling. I took notes during the PSLLC meetings, the transition meetings, and the orientation session. I also made weekly entries in my journal.
Planning the Transition

As the PSLLC prepared to conclude our learning community experiment, we faced a number of decisions. Through PSLLC meetings, mini-PSLLC meetings, email messages, and one-on-one conversations in the Fall of 2009, we clarified our concerns pertaining to the transition. The first step was to identify who would assume responsibility for the functions we had performed. While the initial impetus for forming the PSLLC was to address the information gaps that troubled our newest colleagues, we also served as a forum for the exploration of emergent professional staff concerns.

Our solution was to form two new groups; one group, the Professional Staff Orientation Committee (PSOC), to be responsible for the orientation program and one group, the Professional Staff Advisory Committee (PSAC), to serve as a resource for our elected-professional staff leaders. The AFT was the best choice for housing, and funding, these new groups. Two members offered to present our petition to AFT. They secured approval to form the new groups.

Forming the New Committees

A second step involved forming the new committees. I worked with a small group to develop information sheets outlining the purpose and the time commitment for each group and to draft a one-page application. I also recommended that we use a recruitment strategy similar to the one I used to form the PSLLC.

The Professional Staff Advisory Committee.

The PSAC was formed in October 2009. The ten-person group has six seats designated for professional staff leaders/committee chairpersons and four seats for at-large members. It operates under the direction of our elected professional staff leaders
(who happened to be members of the PSLLC), and with the support of a facilitator, to support the professional staff community. Some of the PSAC’s recent projects included hosting networking events, organizing community building activities, and proposing revisions to university policies.

The Professional Staff Orientation Committee.

The process for creating the PSOC required more time. The PSLLC talked about the size and the composition of the new orientation committee. Several members recommended a group of 10 to 12 people representing different professional classifications, positions, administrative divisions, and years of service, while others advocated for a small group of seven to eight people. We balanced the value of including a broad range of professional staff perspectives against the value of fostering a strong commitment to the program. One member noted that, since we did not know how many of our colleagues would volunteer to carry-on this work, perhaps we could postpone a decision until we received applications for the new group. The members agreed with this recommendation.

The PSLLC utilized direct recruiting, an announcement through the university email system, and an announcement at a professional staff meeting. One unexpected episode occurred during a recruitment presentation at the December professional staff meeting. I recorded this entry in my journal. “I had just started my presentation to 40 professional staff colleagues when [a member of the PSLLC] asked to comment. He proceeded to give a personal testimonial of the value of this project. It was great! He recounted the highlights of his personal experience, from identifying the needs to delivering the first set of orientation manuals to launching the online resource. He talked
about the satisfaction he felt in helping his newest colleagues and the friendships he formed. He said that the project takes work, but he guaranteed that anyone who got involved would be glad he or she did. I couldn’t believe it – what a fantastic endorsement. There was nothing I could say that would be more compelling. So, I folded my notes, pointed out the information sheets and the application forms on the back table, and invited folks to apply. Two people handed me completed applications at the end of the meeting.”

By the middle of January 2010, I had received eight applications for the PSOC (The three members of the PSLLC who wished to continue with the project and I did not complete applications). I arranged for the sub-committee of the PSSL to review the applications. The sub-committee recommended all 12 interested parties and the PSOC was formed. It consisted of 12 professional staff, as no librarians or coaches applied. Almost all of the committee members worked in the Division of Academic Affairs, though they varied in the duration of their services at Rowan. While three members of the new committee reported less than five years of service at the institution, four reported 5-10 years of service and five reported more than 10 years of service. In addition, four members of the new committee had been a participant in one of the orientation session.

Arranging Transition Events

The third step in this process involved two transition events. The first transition event was a co-facilitated orientation session on March 16, 2010. The purpose this session was two-fold: to allow the PSOC to experience the PSLLC’s version of the program for themselves and to allow the members of the PSLLC to conduct one last orientation session.
The March orientation session, the PSLLC’s ninth session, was well attended. There were six new employees, six members of the PSOC, four members of both groups, and three members of the PSLLC in attendance. I opened the session with a brief explanation of the pending transition and an overview of the agenda. After a round of introductions, the presenters moved though the material without incident.

The lunch segment was more conversational than usual. Many members of the PSLLC and the PSOC were friends and seemed to enjoy the opportunity to catch-up with each other. Although I saw these exchanges as another opportunity for community building, I did not think that the new hires were receiving enough attention. I noticed a few members of the PSLLC taking amongst themselves and invited them to join me in a discussion with the new hires.

The second transition event was a meeting between the members of the PSLLC and the members of the new orientation committee. The purpose of this meeting was to provide the new people with an overview of the project, from the PSLLC members’ points of view, and to answer questions. Due to the difficulty of coordinating so many schedules during the academic year, I postponed the meeting to the Summer.

In mid-May, I made this entry in my journal. “It has been interesting to observe the members’ reactions to the end of the PSLLC. Based on my one-one-one conversations with the members, it seems that most have mixed feelings. Member 5 summed it up when she said that as much as she enjoys working with the members of the PSLLC, she thinks that we have brought the orientation program as far as we can and that it is time to turn it over to people who will bring fresh perspectives and new energy. I agree, though I think Member 2 is right – we will miss seeing everyone at the PSLLC
meetings. When I mentioned this to Member 7, she joked about scheduling monthly lunch dates. And when I mentioned it to Member 1, she told me that she is continuing on with the project (so she will not miss the work) and she is serving on search committees with PSLLC members (so she will not miss them).”

The transition meeting was June 16, 2010. Four members of the new group and three members of the original group were not able to attend. I opened the meeting with a round of introductions, asking each person to state his or her name, title, office, group (PSLLC/new orientation committee/both), years of service, and reasons for participating in the project. It was interesting to hear the different motivations for joining this project.

The next topic was a summary of the learning community’s work. Members of the PSLLC took turns recounting the history of the project. One spoke about our process for developing the orientation program. He described the starting point (no supports), the mid-point (so many ideas, the scramble to develop resources and to organize materials), and the end (mixed feelings about turning “our” project over to others). Another talked about the relationships he developed with the other members. Another described the fun she had, especially the adventure of constructing the orientation manuals. And one discussed the challenges we encountered, such as disruptive participants and limited cooperation on the website project.

I distributed the list of goals the PSLLC had set for the program, the evaluation form, and the evaluation data from the nine orientation sessions. The meeting participants were particularly interested in the written comments. We talked about the changes the PSLLC had introduced, as well as the current strengths of the program. I was pleased that both groups valued many of the same elements.
The final discussion topic was ideas for enhancing the orientation program. People from both groups contributed suggestions. Some revolved around information, such as: ways to get involved with campus life, service opportunities, and local dining options. Others related to additional programming, such as: one-on-one mentoring, a monthly lunch program, and a welcome email message. And there were a number of suggestions for the website.

At the end of the meeting, responsibility for the orientation program passed from the members of the PSLLC to the members of the PSOC and the PSLLC experience drew to a close.

Summary of Cycle 5

This chapter traced the PSLLC’s efforts to secure new stewards for our work. The PSLLC sponsored a proposal for the creation of two new groups; one to oversee the orientation program and one to serve as a forum of discussion and action on professional staff issues. The members of the PSLLC initiative a multi-step process to transition responsibility for our orientation program to the new orientation committee. At the end of the transition process, the PSLLC disbanded.

Findings.

The activities in this cycle contributed to the exploration of three of this study’s research questions.

Research Question 1.

As noted in earlier cycles, the PSLLC organized around a collaborative project, rather than a shared theme. One of the challenges associated with this revision to Cox’s model was to find a way to conclude the PSLLC without terminating the orientation
program. Without guidance from the learning community literature, the PSLLC crafted its own solution. Our strategy included forming another group to carry on the work, demonstrating the PSLLC’s version of the orientation program to the new group, and gradually transitioning responsibility for the program to the new group. This proved to be an effective mechanism for meeting the challenge.

**Research Question 2.**

In preparing for the transition, the members of the PSLLC had an opportunity to reflect on their experiences with this project. I think the June meeting provided a fitting conclusion to this experience; the members of the PSLLC shared thoughts on the aspects of the project that mattered to them. They were able to express their sense of the work they had completed and to pass along insights that might benefit the new group.

**Research Question 3.**

No relevant data were produced in this cycle.

**Research Question 4.**

Once the PSLLC committed to terminating our group, I noticed changes in my role. I guided the members of the PSLLC to closure on this experience. The demands of that responsibility prompted me to shift, to some degree, out of a facilitator role and into a more traditional committee chair role. In functional terms, I provided more direction to our process. Instead of encouraging the group to develop a sequence of transition events, I brought recommendations for the group to review. And, rather than opening tasks to the entire group, I recruited certain members based on my assessment of their particular strengths. In sum, I worked with greater autonomy, relied on my own judgment, and made some decisions on behalf of the group.
This was a considerable, but necessary, change. I knew my social work studies prepared me to do this work. I also knew that some members were reluctant to disband the PSLLC. As I noted in my journal, “At the start of this experience, I focused on opening/expanding the range of options - I wanted to get the PSLLC members involved, incorporate their ideas, and collaborate. Now, as we approach the end of the experience, I am focusing on closing/restricting the range of options. I am proud of what we created and how we worked. But not every activity requires that degree of collaboration. In my opinion, collecting too many ideas will impede our ability to bring the experience to a celebratory and satisfying end. This group has finished its work. So, I am taking the lead on this part of the journey. I really think it will be better for the group.”

As I reflected on the manner in which the PSLLC ended, I was satisfied with the termination process.
CHAPTER X
Discussion & Conclusions

The Miami University model for faculty and professional learning communities is a nationally-recognized strategy for promoting meaningful change within the academic community. This flexible technology, developed by Milton Cox, has been adopted by more than 60 institutions (Cox & Richlin, 2004) and has been used to pursue a variety of institutional needs and professional development goals (Beith, 2006; Glowacki-Dudka & Brown, 2007; Nugent et al., 2008; Richlin & Cox, 2004; Sandell, Wigley & Kovalchick, 2004; Shulman, Cox, & Richlin, 2004).

In this action research study, I experimented with an adaptation of Cox’s technology. I introduced a project-based model which I used in my work with the Professional Staff and Librarian Learning Community (PSLLC). This group engaged in a multi-year, collaborative, discussion-based process to create an orientation program. It was hoped that the project-based learning community experience would support individual-, group-, and organizational-level change.

This study explored four primary research questions:

1. How can Cox’s learning community model be adapted for professional staff and librarians?

2. What outcomes did the learning community experience produce for the members of the PSLLC?
3. What outcomes did the PSLLC’s project (the orientation program) produce for orientation program participants?

4. How did my leadership contribute to the learning community experience?

Research Question 1

Cox’s learning communities evolved from his work with faculty development programs. The model calls for the members of a learning community, usually faculty, to work with a trained facilitator to identify a central theme and to develop a common curriculum. Each member also designs an independent, self-directed project related to the central theme (Cox, 2004a, 2004b). Over one academic year, the group meets for shared learning experiences. Research suggests that participation in one of Cox’s learning communities is associated with positive outcomes related to personal growth, professional development, and a sense of community (Cox, 2002a, 2004b; Richlin & Cox, 2004; Sandell, Wigley & Kovalchick, 2004).

Frances Johnson, director of Rowan University’s Faculty Center, initiated an effort to launch a Cox-inspired learning community program in our community. In keeping with the tradition of including “faculty, [professional] staff, [librarian, coaches, and] administrators” as full-members of the scholarly community (James, 1996, p. 4), Frances opened the project to the entire professional community. Several members of the professional staff were interested in participating in a learning community, but questioned whether the proposed groups would contribute to their professional development.

Adaptations to Cox’s Model.

Frances listened to this feedback and revised the terms of the initiative. These changes expanded opportunities for professional staff and librarian participation.
proposed the creation of a cohort-based learning community specifically for this population, Frances supported the idea. She also partnered with me in considering possible modifications to better match Cox’s model to the interests of non-faculty participants.

The challenge, as I saw it, was to reinterpret the task aspect of the learning community experience without compromising the sense of sharing a common interest, limiting opportunities to build relationships within the group, or de-emphasizing the importance of learning and skill building. Based on my prior studies, I thought it was important that the task was relevant to the members’ experiences (Knowles, 1970; Lindeman, 1961; Merriam, 2001). I also thought it was important that the project have the potential to enhance the members’ professional practice (Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982; Knowles, 1970; Lindeman, 1961; Merriam, 2001). My solution was to organize the PSLLC around a collaborative project, rather than a body of scholarship, as typically done with the Cox (2004a, 2004b) model. The locality development literature was particularly helpful in this effort. This approach builds on core strengths, and identifies resources within the individual, the group, or the community that can be more fully cultivated and utilized (Homan, 2004). It focuses the group’s attention on the possibilities in the community, not the problems (Fellin, 1995; Homan, 2004; Rothman, 1995).

The shift to a project-based model introduced many variations from Cox’s (2004a, 2004b) model. One variation was in the character of the group’s interactions. This project required that the members of the group collaborate as they built an orientation program. It offered opportunities to practice communication skills, to learn to integrate
ideas into a shared vision, and to experience reciprocal influence. This adaption is compatible with Van Den Berg and Cooper’s (1995) discussion of the power of community-based change efforts. And it is consistent with Kezar and Lester’s (2009) observations on relationships. They write, relationships are “key to moving a collaboration forward, as well as the learning that occurs between the partners as they negotiate and become familiar with each other” (Kezar & Lester, 2009, p. 198).

A second variation was related to the arc of the learning community experience. To develop the orientation program, the PSLLC’s work process moved through a visioning phase, a designing phase, a construction phase, an evaluation phase, and a transitioning phase. Each phase featured different types of activities and introduced new challenges (Hoffman et al., 2005). Each phase also introduce a level of ambiguity that prompted the members to learn from, and with, each other (Fellin, 1995; Lindeman, 1945; Knowles, 1980; Yonge, 1985).

A third variation was the re-interpretation of the task and process aspects of the experience (Senge, 1990; Toseland & Rivas, 1987). The members of the PSLLC formed this group to solve a problem in our community. There was much to do. Yet, storytelling and discussion were essential for the success of the project. Balancing the “talking” and the “doing” elements of the collaboration process was, as Bakalinsky (1995) and Burghardt (1995) predict, a challenge.

Another variation was the duration of the PSLLC experience. The group’s task was too complex of an undertaking to complete in one academic year; the group required several more years to complete this work. This extended timeline suggests a fifth variation, the challenge of sustaining members’ interest in and commitment to a
volunteer-based project. While Cox’s (2004a, 2004b) groups often offered the participants reassigned time or stipends, the PSSLC members were not offered incentives. And, as this project was not related to any members’ position within the university, the endurance of the group was largely dependent on members’ generosity in contributing to the common good (Bennett, 2003, 2007; Bowman, 2001; Klein, 2002).

A sixth difference related to the future of the PSLLC’s project; the group wished to institutionalize the project so that new professional staff, librarians, and coaches could continue to benefit from the orientation program.

And, a seventh variation from Cox’s (2004a, 2004b) model was the issue of dissolving the PSLLC. The group’s original task was to create an orientation program to address an institutional need. Once we accomplished that goal, the group moved on to program development activities. Without an identified end point, it was difficult to determine when the group had completed its task.

In sum, the shift to a project-based focus, and these seven corresponding characteristics, establish the PSLLC as a variation of Cox’s (2004a, 2004b) learning community model.

Essential Elements of a Learning Community.

Early in the life of the PSLLC, it became clear that this group was different from the other two groups in Rowan’s learning community initiative. These differences prompted the question, was the PSLLC actually a learning community? To answer this question, I considered the consistency in the structure, the functioning, and the learning environment of Cox’s (2004a, 2004b) groups and this group.
I studied two of the considerations, structure and functioning, in terms of their definitions. Cox describes his faculty and professional learning community (FPLC) as a: a cross-disciplinary faculty and staff group, of six to fifteen members (eight to twelve members is the recommended size) [plus a facilitator], who engage in an active, collaborative, year-long program with a curriculum about enhancing teaching and learning and with frequent seminars and activities that provide learning, development, the scholarship of teaching, and community building. (Cox, 2004b, p. 8)

In Chapter I, I describe a PSLLC as:

a small group of cross-disciplinary professional staff and librarians. The learning community creates a forum for colleagues to engage in a collaborative process of learning and community building. Through monthly face-to-face meetings and regular email exchanges, the members of the PSLLC work together to identify a theme for their project(s), design the project(s), and implement their vision.

These operational definitions demonstrate that both versions of the technology share a number of elements. Each features a commitment to cross-disciplinary membership, a small size, and a collaborative process. Each places an emphasis on learning, professional development, and community building. The key differences between the groups can be attributed to the differences in the practice contexts of the participants. That is, the faculty in Cox’s (2004a, 2004b) groups seek to explore a shared curriculum for one academic year in an effort to enhance skills related to teaching and learning, whereas the professional staff and the librarian in the PSLLC created an
orientation program through a multi-year program in an effort to enhance skills related to collaboration and initiating change.

I studied the third consideration, the learning environment within the group, in terms of the 10 essential qualities Cox identified to distinguish learning communities from more traditional committees. These qualities are: safety and trust, openness, respect, responsiveness, collaboration, relevance, challenge, enjoyment, esprit de corps, and empowerment (Cox, 2004b). I reinterpreted Cox’s operational definition to align with the experiences and the goals of the professional staff and librarian in the PSLLC. I incorporated my re-interpreted definitions into the PSLLC Evaluation Survey to measure the members’ sense of the importance of these qualities in the PSLLC experience as well as their satisfaction with those qualities.

I administered the survey near the end of the fourth cycle of the project (January 2009). The data indicate that the members considered all 10 qualities to be important to the PSLLC experience. The members also indicated that they were satisfied with all 10 qualities. In fact, several members assigned particularly high scores, in both importance and satisfaction, to the relevance of the orientation program, the quality of the product the group produced, and the value of the time and the effort invested in the group. They also assigned high marks, in both importance and satisfaction, to statements relating to members’ responsiveness to one another, the spirit of collaboration within the group, and opportunities for relationship building.

These numeric findings were supported by the written responses to the short answer items on the survey and verbal responses to my interview questions. These data sources convey the sense of accomplishment or fulfillment the members’ derived from
this experience as well as their appreciation for the relationships they formed with others in the group. Members 4, 5, and 10 commented on the value of storytelling, both as a mechanism for collecting information for the project and as a means for learning more about the members of the group. Others spoke of their pride in and ownership of the orientation program. And several members noted the learning and friendships they gained from this experience. These findings suggest that the PSLLC’s learning environment did incorporate the 10 qualities Cox deemed essential in a learning community.

In sum, the primary aspects of the structure, the functioning, and the learning environment of the PSLLC were compatible with Cox’s model; the group was a learning community.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Project-Based Model.

In keeping with the traditions of the action research process (Bradbury & Reason, 2001), this project was emergent and participatory. Unlike other research I have undertaken, I endeavored to study the impact of the modifications I proposed to Cox’s learning community technology while I partnered with the members of the PSLLC in implementing the changes and developing the orientation program. As Brydon-Miller et al. (2003) predict, this resulted in a flexible, and messy, process and a powerful learning experience.

The PSLLC allowed me to experience, and to study, the rewards, and the challenges, of a project-based learning community. The most significant modification was the change in the group’s focus. While Cox’s groups typically organize around a shared academic interest or a cohort interest, there was some question of the suitability of
this type of focus for non-faculty participants. My professional staff colleagues requested a learning community experience designed around their professional development goals; one that would promote their specific interests, skill development, educational growth, and socialization.

My solution was the PSLLC, a project-based learning community oriented toward bridging the information gaps in our community. While the decision offered many advantages, it also presented challenges. One advantage was the PSLLC’s use of storytelling as a method for accessing and sharing the members’ knowledge.

Storytelling proved to be a powerful aspect of our work process. In the interviews, members explained that they welcomed the chance to utilize these frustrating experiences in a productive way. This made the project personally meaningful. I observed that, as each member recounted his or her tale, the others engaged in attentive, respectful, and reflective listening. Speakers were rarely interrupted. And when a member responded to another’s story, he or she offered counter-point without delegitimizing the other’s experience. This established the value of multiple perspectives; (Homan, 2004; McNeely, 1999; Meenaghan, Gibbons & Mc Nutt, 2005; Rothman, 1995) and allowed us to connect individual experiences to group-level issues. I believe these early storytelling exchanges helped to set expectations for our collaborative process. (Cnaan & Rothman, 1995; Khinduka, 1987).

However, storytelling also introduced challenges. That is, it consumes a lot of time. Members’ stories varied in length and degree to which they applied to the topic under discussion. It also takes time to sort through the tale and extract the most relevant
points. Given the limited amount of time allocated for each PSLLC meeting, it was sometimes difficult to balance the activity with the other items on the agenda.

There were also several advantages associated with the decision to create an orientation program. One was the ambiguous nature of the project. It accommodated a broad range of issues, which interview data suggests encouraged the members to take ownership in setting the direction of the project. Over the years, it moved through several stages of program development. As it evolved, the members engaged in different types of activities, learned different skills, and literally saw the results. Survey data suggest that this evolution reinforced the practical value of the work and helped to maintain the members’ interest in and commitment to the project.

Of course, there were challenges. As the PSLLC moved through the different stages of developing the orientation program, I struggled to balance the learning and the community aspects of the experience. My challenge was to blend community building into our work process, despite looming deadlines. To do this, I introduced a variety of strategies, such as semi-structured monthly meetings, small group work session, clusters of meetings, and mini-meetings, into our repertoire. I tried to limit the amount of meeting time devoted to administrative tasks by using email to communicate updates and distribute materials.

The pace of the work varied; at certain points in the process, missing one PSLLC meeting could be significant. Although I distributed meeting summaries, these written records could not convey the richness of the PSLLC’s discussions. Therefore, I made a point to reach out, through phone calls and office-visits, to members to “bring them up to speed.” These chats also created opportunities for one-on-one conversation; I learned
more about a members’ interest in the project, his or her thoughts on our progress, and his or her interests outside of Rowan. This strategy was not particularly time efficient, but certainly enriched my relationships with the members. I also believe that the extra effort I extended signaled that the members’ participation in the project mattered to me.

Another challenge had to do with the future of the orientation program. The PSLLC never intended to be an on-going group, and the members knew that, eventually, it would disband. In order to ensure the continuation of our work, the PSLLC looked to pass responsibility to another group. We considered a number of funded organizational sponsors; and chose the AFT (our union). At a time when I expected the group to wind down, the members were active in initiating the creation of two new groups and mapping out a transition plan. This transition stage was an important aspect of our shared learning experience; it offered a sense of closure.

In sum, this project-based version of Cox’s learning community did provide the professional staff and librarian participants with a collaborative environment that aligned with their interests, promoted learning, and built a sense of community within the group.

Research Question 2

The project-based version of Cox’s model was created in response to the professional staffs’ request for learning community experience relevant and meaningful to them. In our earliest meetings, the members of the PSLLC described, in broad terms, the types of experiences they sought. They wanted to craft a practical solution to a recognized and long-standing problem. They wanted to work with colleagues from other disciplines. And they wanted to develop practical skills related to their professional practice.
As the project progressed, the members of the PSLLC clarified these wishes into a set of outcomes relating to networking, initiating change, helping others, and learning. The data collected through observations, journaling, interviews, and the PSLLC Evaluation Survey consistently indicate that the members achieved positive outcomes in these areas. And, in addition to the outcomes anticipated by the members, the learning community experience also produced a number of unanticipated outcomes. The data demonstrate that PSLLC members experienced benefits relating to building relationships, establishing trust, feelings of pride, and sharing power and decision-making. These outcomes can be classified as individual-, group-, or organizational-level changes.

In this section, I compare the findings from the PSLLC experience to the normative-re-educative literature that informed and contributed to my work with this group.

Individual-Level Changes.

Learning.

The PSLLC experience provided the members with opportunities for many types of learning. One type pertained to knowledge building. In our discussions, the members shared information on their core responsibilities and the primary functions of their offices. We reviewed university policies, considered their impact on different organizational units, and discovered that several university systems did not necessarily operate in the ways we assumed (Lattucca, 2005; Taylor, 1997). And through these exchanges, the members gained a broader perspective on the intricacies of this university’s operations and a greater appreciation for others’ contributions. These outcomes are consistent with Cox’s (2002a, 2002b) research on with faculty learning
communities and with community development literature. Many times, when members from different parts of a community join forces to work on a project, they come to understand more about their shared environment in the process (Fellin, 1995; Rothman, 1995).

Another type of learning pertained to skill building. Our work required significant collaboration. The orientation project offered opportunities for members to practice communicating their ideas, actively listening to others, and negotiating a shared understanding. It prompted members to undertake activities that were outside of their usual assignments, like speaking in public, drafting data collection instruments, and writing section summaries for the orientation manual. Members offered one another advice, encouragement, and feedback as they develop new skills and worked together, in small groups or one-on-one, to complete assignments for the project. Bakalinsky (1995), Cranton (1994), and Kreisberg (1992) describe the benefit of this type of reciprocal influence for members’ learning and growth.

*Feelings of Pride.*

The members of the PSLLC were proud of our orientation program. All of the members expressed the sense of accomplishment from closing information gaps and solving a long-term community problem. And, we all marveled at the first set of orientation manuals, physical evidence of our hours and hours of hard work. Most of the members felt pride in our self-directed process and the voluntary nature of the group. Other aspects of the experience were more personally meaningful to specific members. Some members described their satisfaction in using their own frustrating experiences to create something of practical value to others. And a few appreciated the altruism
demonstrated through this project. These elements are consistent with the literature on empowerment (Homan, 2004; McNeely, 1999; Rothman, 1995).

Group-Level Changes.

Helping Others.

At Rowan, there is a long-standing tradition of service to the academic community. However, as noted by the members of the PSLLC, this is most often practiced through participation in “do little” committees. The PSLLC experience was the antithesis of the traditional committee experience. The members had ownership of every step of the group’s work; we had the power to define the problem, to establish the scope of our work, and to set our own deadlines. We aspired to create an orientation program that was more welcoming and more helpful than what could have developed through a solitary effort (Bennett, 1998, 2003; Chin & Benne, 1976, 1984; Putman, 1995; Rothman & Tropman, 1987)

Building Relationships.

A true sense of camaraderie emerged within the PSLLC. As members recounted stories of their encounters with certain information gaps, I observed many nodding heads. While the members might have faced different issues, they shared the experience of having struggled and the desire to make change. These commonalities, along with regular monthly contact, help to deepen the relationships between people (Fellin, 1995; Khinduka, 1987; Lindeman, 1945; Rothman, 1995). As Homan (2004) notes, “relationships depend on two necessary ingredients: time and trust” (p. 51). The PSLLC provided both.
Establishing Trust.

The PSLLC’s use of storytelling in our earliest meetings helped to lay the foundation for the strong sense of trust within the group. We started with impersonal topics, such as the convoluted paperwork required for a parking pass, and gradually moved on to more sensitive topics, such as the struggle to access accurate information on medical leave policies. By Cycle 4, the PSLLC meetings had become a safe place for members’ to talk about concerns outside of the scope of the orientation program. The caring and support the members extended to each other signaled the connections that formed between the members. This group established a strong sense of membership.

Bakalinsky (1995) might explain this development in terms of the members’ basic psychological needs. He suggests that when a group offers its members acceptance and recognition, a sense of group cohesion emerges. Similarly, Bollen and Hoyle (1990), Lee and Robbins (2000), and McMillan and Chavis (1986) speak to the importance of social connectedness in the establishment of trust.

Sharing Power and Decision-Making.

An essential feature of this type of learning community technology is the autonomy of the group. Without an outside force setting the group’s direction or dictating its process, the members of the PSLLC had the rare opportunity to choose their own path (Cox, 2001, 2004a, 2004b; Richlin & Cox, 2004). In addition, at this institution, professional staff typically implement, rather than create, new programs. Thus, the PSLLC offered the members an unfamiliar set of working conditions.

Through the creation of the orientation program, the members of the PSLLC gained experience in this alternative dynamic. In the absence of a positional leader, we
had to learn to make decisions. We developed a preference of consensus-building strategies, and then had to develop the skills necessary to complete these processes.

We supported members as they learned to respond to provocations while managing their emotions. We committed to holding one another accountable for completing agreed-upon tasks. As we grew more comfortable with this dynamic, we were able to reflect on our process and acknowledge the value of members’ specific contributions.

*Networking.*

The members of the PSLLC valued the networking component of this experience. They enjoyed interacting with colleagues outside of their usual circle and discussing topics from the members’ diverse perspectives. The members agreed that they learned a great deal about the university through the other members of the PSLLC. And they valued forming connections with the type of colleague who was eager to share access to his or her larger professional network. The connections formed between the members of the PSLLC translated into invitations to serve on other committees, to collaborate on job-related projects, and to lunch. These relationships contributed to a change in the leadership processes operating within the professional staff community (Chin & Benne, 1976; Katan & Spiro, 1987).

*Introducing a New Leadership Process.*

The PSLLC’s acceptance of my leadership practice introduced a new process to the professional staff community. Prior to this project, the profession staff community lacked group-based problem solving-structures. This meant that our elected professional staff leaders, or other motivated colleagues, often found themselves bearing sole
responsibility for resolving complex issues. In my opinion, this practice exhausted our elected leaders, served as a disincentive to early-career colleagues’ participation in leadership tasks, and contributed to the persistence of recognized community problem.

The PSLLC provided our professional staff community with a new option for the practice of leadership, a model that shares the responsibility and distributes the work load across a group of collaborators. This model was very successful for the PSLLC, which helped to introduce this alternative to the members of our community. That is, I consistently recognized the other members of the group during my PSLLC announcements at the once-a-semester professional staff caucus meetings and at many of the AFT monthly meetings (which were attended by faculty, professional staff, librarians, and coaches). This signaled that, although I was the spokesperson, I did not claim ownership over the project.

In addition, several members of the PSLLC had leadership responsibility for other professional staff committees. I served on some of those groups and, over time, I noticed subtle changes in the functioning of the recontracting committee and the professional development grant committee. There was a shift to a more collaborative style of exploring ambiguous issues. On several occasions, I watched as these committee leaders invited the committee members to contribute their perspectives and to participate in the decision-making process. This signaled some acceptance of group-based decision making practices.

Another sign of the diffusion of group-based decision-making was the level of professional staff interest in joining the two new groups formed to carry on the PSLLC’s work. Both the Professional Staff Advisory Committee (PSAC), created to serve as a
forum for multi-perspective discussion of professional staff issues, and the Professional Staff Orientation Committee (PSOC), created to coordinate the orientation program, attracted new members. A notable development was the interest new colleagues expressed in these groups. Based on my six-years of experience on the professional staff recontracting committee, I know that this was a departure from typical patterns. Very few professional staff engage in these types of service activities in the earliest years of their Rowan careers.

*Initiating Change.*

The members of the PSLLC joined the group because they want to improve an aspect of our academic community. Through the group’s project, the members learned to translate intentions into actions. Step by step, the members gained awareness of their capacity to bridge the information gaps and craft solutions to problems in our academic community. It is interesting to note that the members demonstrated this awareness in the interviews, but rated it as one of the least important and the least satisfying quality of the learning community experience in the survey.

*Organizational-Level Changes.*

The literature on organizational change describes two categories of change, first- and second-order change. First-order change is defined as innovations that improve the performance of the existing organizational system, while second-order change is defined as innovations that transform the “mission, cultural, functioning processes, and structure” of the entire organization (Kezar, 2001, p. 16). The PSLLC experiment achieved a number of first-order changes. It closed long-standing information gaps, helped to strengthen the relationships between members of the PSLLC, provided structured
networking opportunities for the members of the PSLLC and the orientation participants, introduced a new leadership process to the professional staff community, and institutionalized two new (funded) groups to continue critical problem-solving functions. These accomplishments are significant. They have contributed, and will continue to contribute, to the health of the professional staff community at Rowan University. They do not, however, rise to the level of second order change.

Research Question 3

One of the factors that contributed to the formation of the PSLLC was the members’ awareness of a community problem. Our university did not have a mechanism for assisting newly hired professional staff, librarians, and coaches to acclimate to the Rowan community; though it did provide such support to new faculty. Therefore, each new professional staff, librarian, or coach navigated Rowan’s systems on his or her own until he or she developed a network of peers. This practice resulted in many confusing, frustrating, and lonely experiences.

The project-based focus of the PSLLC created an opportunity for a group of experienced professional staff, and a librarian, to work together to bridge the information gaps for our colleagues. The outcomes derived from the PSLLC membership experience was one focus of this study; the outcomes derived from new hires’ participation in the orientation program was another.

The members of the PSLLC set a number of goals for the orientation program. One goal was to create a “ready reference.” This was defined as an organized compilation of information on: the policies and the procedures that explained the terms of the new hires’ employment; the university’s decision- and recommendation-making
bodies and their practices; the educational, cultural, and athletic groups on campus; the calendar of events and activities; and many other resources. Another goal was to create an orientation program. This was defined as a two-hour lunch orientation session that included a presentation on the resources in the orientation manual, an informal question-and-answer session on institutional practices, and an opportunity to meet other new hires and the members of the PSLLC. And the third goal was to ease new hires’ transition by helping them form their own network of colleagues on campus.

The PSLLC used two data collection instruments to assess the degree to which the orientation achieved these goals. The first was a one-page evaluation survey distributed to the new hires at the end of each orientation session. The other was a two-page follow-up survey to the new hires who had participated in the first six orientation sessions. The data provide strong evidence that the orientation program was meeting the goals set by the PSLLC. The written comments were particularly positive; the orientation participants expressed their appreciation of the information in the orientation manual, the assistance in decoding perplexing aspects of Rowan’s culture, and the PSLLC members’ voluntary efforts in creating the program. Participants also appreciated the opportunity to network with both new, and experienced, colleagues. A few even commented on the camaraderie of the PSLLC, noting that they looked forward to forging friendly relationships with their colleagues.

In addition to the written feedback, the members of the PSLLC had opportunities to interact with the participants in other settings. Many PSLLC members reported that he or she was approached, on the sidewalk or in a hallway, by new colleagues with a
question or a concern. This suggested that the new hires recognized the members of the PSLLC as a resource for information, advice, and support.

And, the PSLLC members were pleased to discover that four past-orientation participants submitted applications to serve on the new PSOC. We interpreted this as evidence of the positive impact the program had on those participants.

Conclusions on the PSLLC Experience

The data collected through this action research project provides compelling evidence of the value of this project-based version of Cox’s learning community technology. The PSLLC experiment demonstrates that it is a viable approach for achieving pro-community impacts, such as building relationships, practicing the skills of collaboration, and achieving first-order institutional change. It supported the efforts of members of the PSLLC to mobilize their good intentions, combine their knowledge, and achieve outcomes that support, and perhaps revitalize, one segment of Rowan’s academic community. It provides evidence for MacGregor and Smith’s (2005) position that “developing collaborative structures, providing learning occasions, and engaging in meaningful work can fuel lasting learning, personal development, and deep friendships” (p. 8), as well as Lindeman’s (1945) position that both social-action and adult-learning are achievable through group processes.

Research Question 4

The fourth research question in this action research project pertained to my practice of leadership. More specifically, it probed how my leadership contributed to the PSLLC experience. This question presented an opportunity to examine the constancy between my espoused theory and my actual practice of leadership.
Review of My Espoused Theory.

My espoused theory draws from the literature in the postheroic tradition. The theories within this tradition share four characteristics: an understanding that frames leadership as a collaborative activity practiced at all levels of an organization, an emphasis on the social components and influence patterns in the leadership process, an awareness of group dynamics, and a sensitivity to issue of gender and power (Fletcher, 2002, 2004). These values and commitments are evident in three theoretical approaches that contribute to my espoused theory, namely distributed leadership, feminist leadership, and shared leadership.

These formal theories, along with reflection on my past experiences with leadership, helped me to identify the four core constructs at the center of my espoused theory. The core constructs are:

- **Knowledge** - In my practice, I will strive to be sensitive to and encourage exploration of the different knowledge bases within the learning community.

- **Sensemaking** - In my practice, I will strive to encourage group discussion and promote the negotiation of shared meanings. I will encourage the members of the learning community to contribute and to respond to each other’s contributions.

- **Power With** - In my practice, I will work toward a power with approach. I will attend to issues of power and influence within the learning community and will strive to share power with my learning community peers.
• Sense of Belonging - In my practice, I will strive to promote connection and cohesion within the learning community by incorporating community building strategies into our process.

Assessing My Application of the Core Constructs.

To assess the extent to which my actual leadership practice aligned with my ideal practice, I considered my performance in the five key phases of the PSLLC experience.

Recognizing the Opportunity for Change.

When I accepted Frances Johnson’s invitation to join in bringing Cox’s Faculty and Professional Learning Communities (FPLC) to our institution, I did not foresee the experience that unfolded. During the planning discussion for the FPLC initiative, I sensed the project, as originally conceived, might not appeal to my professional staff colleagues. My instinct was confirmed by my peers, and when Frances revised the initiative, I seized the opportunity to propose a learning community for the professional staff and librarian segments of our academic community.

These decisions and actions illuminated some aspects of my emerging practice. They demonstrated my awareness that the professional development needs of my colleagues differ, in some ways, from the needs of faculty and my willingness to advocate on behalf of my group. They signaled my recognition that Cox’s (2004a, 2004b) model could serve as the basic structure for a project-based group designed around professional staffs’ learning and growth. They expressed my preference to partner, through collaborative relationships, in the pursuit of change (Harris et al., 2007; Spillane, 2006; Spillane & Sherer, 2004). And they confirmed my use of conversation to share perceptions and points of view.
Attracting Members to the PSLLC.

Once Frances agreed to include the PSLLC as part of the pilot set of learning communities, I launched my recruiting efforts. This was a significant component of the project. My challenge was to promote this group as an opportunity for community building, learning, and change without imposing my own vision and my personal priorities on the group. My solution was to propose the orientation program. This topic was broad enough to accommodate a wide-range of interests and specific enough to convey a general sense of the group’s focus. This was consistent with distributed leadership perspective on focusing on a group’s commonalities, rather than its differences (Harris et al., 2007).

In my direct recruitment efforts, I stressed the opportunities the PSLLC offered, including the opportunity to partner with colleagues, to solve problems, to be part of a change effort. I emphasized the chance to develop solutions to shared problems because I sensed that a meaningful, self-directed, action-orientated project would appeal to my colleagues. And it did; this framing signaled my interest in including the PSLLC members in setting the group’s direction and defining their individual interests relative to the project. It also signaled my interest in working with others, who presumably had different experiences and knowledge-bases than I, in solving a problem impacting a segment of our community. It also provided an early indication of my role in this process; I sought to facilitate, rather than direct, the group’s efforts. I did not claim expertise in creating orientation programs, but I contributed my knowledge of collaborative processes, my experience with group-work techniques, and my belief that the group could work together to meet its goals.
These contributions were recognized in Frances’ interview statements, in the planning group member’s interview statements, in the PSLLC members’ interview statements, and in my notes and journal entries.

*Establishing Work Processes.*

As a learning community facilitator, my role was to guide the process for establishing a common agenda, monitor the power dynamics within the group, and balance the group’s social and intellectual goals (Richlin & Cox, 2004).

Given the project-based focus of my group, my role also included helping the PSLLC reframe the information gaps as opportunities for change, comparing and contrasting our own experiences to better understand the complexity of the issues, and converting good ideas into actions. This was demanding work. I was in regular communication with the members, as a group and as individuals. I often researched group-work techniques that could enhance our process and introduced different strategies to help the members build relationships while we created the orientation program. This is aligned with feminist perspective on leadership (Astin & Leland, 1991) and the shared approach to leadership (Conger & Pearce, 2003; Seer, Keller & Wilkerson, 2003).

When I realized the true scope of our self-directed project, I had to resist the temptation to step-in and provide direction to the work. I reminded myself the group would benefit more from finding its own path than from me telling them what to do (Blackmore, 1989). I also reminded myself that the members had ideas for organizing our work (Spillane, 2006). And the data collected throughout this project support that belief. The members had the chance to learn to negotiate expectations, to honor commitments, and to appreciate others’ tales. These were significant elements of the
PSLLC experience that would not have been possible if I had been at the center of the project. By leading from the side, I opened up space for other members make their own leadership contributions (Fletcher & Kaufer, 2003).

Although I did not direct the group, I invested considerable effort in anticipating and responding to their needs. Examples of this include: organizing agendas, reallocating meetings, proposing alternative group processes, and checking-in with members outside of the PSLLC meetings. And, I relied on my project management skills to track our progress, so that the members could focus their resources on actualizing our shared vision.

The members’ appreciation of my leadership contributions were captured in the interview data and in the PSLLC evaluation survey data also provide evidence. A number of written comments convey individual members’ sense of the value my practice added to the group’s experience. In addition, the numeric data also provide useful information.

The members reported high levels of satisfaction with the 10 elements Cox (2004b) describes as essential for a learning community. These elements can be categorized into the four core commitments of my espoused leadership model. That is, my understanding of knowledge incorporates Cox’s notions of respect, responsiveness, and openness. Similarly, my understanding of sensemaking maps to Cox’s notions of relevance, collaboration, and challenge; while my sense of power is consistent with Cox’s notions of safety and trust, collaboration, and empowerment. And, my sense of belonging is compatible with Cox’s notions of safety and trust, responsiveness, esprit de corps, and enjoyment (Cox, 2004b). The members’ satisfaction with the PSLLC
experience, coupled with the quality of the orientation program we produced, affirms the utility of my espoused theory and the success of my efforts to demonstrate it in practice.

*Maintaining Momentum.*

Once the PSLLC delivered the pilot set of orientation programs, I expected to start the transition to the end of our shared experience. I was pleasantly surprised with the members’ enthusiasm for continuing our work on the orientation program. That all ten active members continued to actively participate in the group beyond the initial one year commitment indicated that they valued the PSLLC experience and/or derived meaning from the project. The challenge for me, as the facilitator, was to recognize the changes in our task, to acknowledge the opportunity to deepen the relationships within the group, and to propose suitable modifications for re-balancing the task-relationships elements of the experience. I was not certain how the members would respond to the alternation in the pace of our work or the greater emphasis on our relationships.

In this phase of my leadership journey, I reviewed my meeting notes and the interview data looking for clues of what the members wanted from the PSLLC experience. Again, I resisted the temptation to impose my will on the group. I focused on the goals that had not been highlighted in the earlier stages of our process. And, again, I researched strategies for achieving those aims. At the same time, I tried to re-affirm the members’ sense of the importance of this work by providing periodic updates on our progress. I also drew attention to the anticipated value of the program enhancement projects.
Some of the members noted these contributions in the interviews. They indicated that my efforts had the desired effect; these efforts helped the members keep track of the developments with the orientation program while we deepened our relationships.

Concluding the Group.

Another difficult aspect of this leadership experience was figuring out how to bring the PSLLC to an end. Originally, the group was slated to end at the conclusion of the pilot year. However, in response to community needs and group interest, we continued to meet for several years as we added new elements to the orientation program. Some of our program enhancement ideas require the cooperation of collaborators outside of the PSLLC. These contrast of experiences highlighted just how well the PSLLC worked together.

This group eventually completed its major projects. At that point, I suggested that we prepare to terminate the PSLLC. I felt responsible for bringing the group to closure, so I stepped into the center of this phase of work. My intention was to transfer responsibility for the orientation program to a permanent group. I wanted to end the PSLLC experience before the members grew bored with the project; after four years, it was time to turn our attentions to other challenges.

I proposed a series of steps to achieve these aims, as well as to recognize the significant contribution the PSLLC had made for the professional staff, librarians, and coaches within our community.

Conclusions on My Practice of Leadership.

My actual leadership practice was very consistent with the ideas I described in my espoused leadership theory. As Kouzes and Posner (2002) predict, I modified my practice
to respond to the changing circumstances of the PSLLC or to enact new-found knowledge. And as Huber (1998) suggests, I gradually learned to expand my range of practice while maintaining my core constructs and my foundational beliefs. I did not experience major incidents of incongruence between my beliefs and my behavior, although I was tempted, from time to time, to cut through the ambiguity and impose some order. My belief in the power of group process provided me with the resources to manage my discomfort, give the work back to the group, and engage in a collaborative practice of leadership with the members of the PSLLC.
CHAPTER XI

Reflections on Leadership and Growth

Introduction

In Chapter II, I explored the construct of leadership. I defined it as an activity, a process, and an experience. I stated my belief that it can be practiced with a spirit of cooperation, collegiality, and mutual-respect; with an appreciation of the complexities of each leadership context; with sensitivity to the perspectives of the constituents within the leadership context; and with a commitment to share in the possibility and the responsibility of collective action. And, I articulated my espoused leadership theory, including the values, commitments, and theoretical traditions I hoped to incorporate into my leadership practice.

In Chapters V to IX, I recounted my experiences with the Professional Staff and Librarian Learning Community (PSLLC). While my participation in this group provided a context for testing my espoused theory, it also created opportunities of personal growth. I had many opportunities to engage in the difficult work of translating my intentions into actions and reflecting on my evolving practice. In this chapter, I describe those aspects of this journey.

Reflections on the Orientation Project

Years ago, I met with my psychology professor, Dr. Skelton, to review an undergraduate reading assignment. In the course of our conversation, I asked him how a psychologist chooses the topic he or she researched. He explained that a topic is
interesting to the researcher because he or she feels a personal connection to it. It is related, in some way, to the researcher’s inner world. He then illustrated his point by accurately speculating on my connection to the topic of my last paper.

Dr. Skelton’s lesson has stayed with me. My connection to this project is personal. It does reflect pieces of my inner world. My first few months at Rowan were confusing. I did not know which administrative processes to complete, how to complete them, or where to go for assistance. I could not find a designated person or office to serve as a resource and the colleagues around me, many of whom were long-time employees, were unfamiliar with the current policies. It was a frustrating, and lonely, time.

Before long, I met other new hires. We exchanged information, pooled our knowledge, and formed a network. I had “my group,” a set of colleagues I could call with work-related concerns. This development was significant; it was the first step toward finding my place within Rowan’s academic community. I was pleased with the improvement in my circumstances. Yet, I continued to wonder why the university did not provide a system of support for the new hires. Why did each new person have to make his or her own way? From time to time, I talked about this with my network. We all agreed that there had to be a better way.

As I felt more secure in my position, I talked about my concerns within a wider circle of professional staff colleagues. And, while everyone agreed that the situation was unacceptable, no one offered a solution. The variation in professional staff roles, the complexity of the university environment, and the circuitous path each person had followed likely contributed to the perpetuation of the problem. But the most significant
factor, in my opinion, was that no person or office was responsible for this function. It was not part of anyone’s “job.” Therefore, any effort to address the information gaps had to rely on voluntary efforts. Fortunately, my professional staff colleagues are, in general, a service-minded group.

When Frances announced the revisions to the Faculty and Professional Learning Community (FPLC) program, I was surprised to be flooded by memories of social work school. The lessons from my community development studies helped me to recognize an opportunity to mobilize the assets in my community to solve a real problem. These assets included: an awareness of the problem, a willingness to address the problem, and my colleagues’ rich pools of relevant experience. The learning community initiative was also an asset. It offered a structure, a process, and a small budget to support this work. These resources, combined with my involvement in the FPLC initiative, led to the PSLLC and the orientation program.

I consider the orientation program to be a significant resource for the professional staff, librarian, and coach community. The members of the PSLLC, all of whom are experienced, well-connected members of Rowan community, spent months tracking down information and creating new materials. We invested hundreds of person-hours in developing the orientation manual, updating the content, and hosting the orientation sessions. I am proud of the program we created.

I am also proud of the example we set. Our project addressed a problem that we, the members of the PSLLC, no longer experienced ourselves. That my colleagues and I committed to the project, invested years of effort, and developed it to its current state is a
remarkable accomplishment. I hope that our story becomes part of the “professional staff lore” at Rowan University.

And I am proud of my work on this project. I contributed a number of critical talents, such as the ability to communicate ideas, the ability to motivate others, and the ability to unite individual perspectives within a shared vision. I also contributed some essential resources, including my professional reputation, my professional and personal networks of relationships, and my personal commitment to the project. These contributions enriched the orientation project.

Reflections on the Learning Community Experience

My participation in the PSLLC has been a profound experience. In social work school, I read about the power of collaboration and the transformative nature of group work. I could not wait to finish my studies, land my first job, and share in these wonderful experiences. Well, I entered the workforce and soon discovered that very, very few meetings are enjoyable. While I did learn factual content at meetings, I knew little about the other people in the room or what the topic meant to them. The more meetings I attended, the more I understood why people actively avoided them.

One of the appealing aspects of Cox’s (2004a, 2004b) work is his recognition of the human element in work processes. His model emphasizes the value of community building; he wants participants to share their knowledge, their perspectives, and their interests. It sounded like fun, until I participated in the planning group meetings. Those meetings reminded me of the consequences of failing to balance the relationship and the business aspects of a discussion. As some of the planning meetings dragged on, I found
myself thinking of other things I could be doing. I tried to incorporate this insight into my work with the PSLLC.

Initially, I had concerns about my ability to facilitate the PSLLC. I knew how a learning community differed from a traditional committee. I also knew that a facilitator’s role differed from a committee chair’s role, but I was not confident that I understood how a facilitator actually executed his or her duties in a traditional learning community (never mind in my adapted version of Cox’s model). I did not know how to be an equal member of the group while, at the same time, providing guidance and support to it. I wanted to be “a” leader in the PSLLC, not “the” leader.

To prepare for my role, I re-read my social work books and participated in a facilitation workshop. These steps calmed some of my anxiety; I liked knowing that I had an array of strategies and techniques to support the group’s work. In addition, I knew that Frances was happy to serve as a resource and a support. And I was fairly sure that my fellow PSLLC members, who understood that I was “stretching” a bit with this role, would forgive a few mistakes.

Early in the life of the group, the members of the PSLLC settled into a collaborative dynamic. We spent a lot of time talking. We told many stories, some of which were a bit long-winded. When I noticed restlessness in the group, I would re-focus attention by asking the group to summarize what we had learned and inviting other perspectives on the issue. Many times, folks did have a different point of view. I believe that this type of exercise enhanced the members’ sense of ownership of the project.

We also spent a fair amount of time making and commenting on lists. The value of these activities lay in their power to craft and to reinforce a shared vision of our work.
An idea was introduced by one member, and then explored and expanded by the group. The group decided whether and how to incorporate issues into the orientation project. And, by revisiting the lists, we were able to re-consider our treatment of a topic and to benchmark our progress. I believe this activity clarified to the members of the PSLLC that, together, they set the direction of our project.

As much as I believed in shared-decision making, shared power, and shared responsibility, I did have moments when I questioned the wisdom of those commitments. The amount of work in front of the PSLLC was, at times, overwhelming, while the time we had together each month was short. At times, I was tempted to forgo the group discussion, which consumed so much time, and simply impose a decision to move the project forward. In these moments, I wrote long journal entries debating the relative value of task and process – was it more important to produce a success of the orientation program on time or to be true to our collaborative, discussion-based way of working together?

Along the way, I became aware of the risk I had asked the members of the PSLLC to take. It occurred to me that, perhaps there was a reason that no one had taken on this challenge. I had an attack of the “what ifs” - What if the task was too big? What if we did not finish by March? What if I was terribly wrong in my views of leadership? What if Cox’s (2004a, 2004b) model was not suited for this type of adaptation? What if this experience hurt my friends?

When the worries became too much, I reached out to a critical friend. He asked a series of question to establish that the project was on-track. Unfortunately, the “what ifs” remained. So, he offered me an alternate set - What if the task was just big enough?
What if the new hires were supported? What if the project achieved more that we hoped? What if the adaptation was a valuable extension of Cox’s (2004a, 2004b) work? What if my friends learned from and valued this experience? As I thought about those possibilities, I felt much better. I captured the two sets of ideas on an index card, which I taped to the inside cover of my reflective journal. When the doubts reappeared, I simply reviewed the alternate possibilities.

Once the project progressed to the point that failure seemed unlikely, I broached this topic in the one-on-one interviews. The members mentioned initial concerns and stated that the introduction of small groups resolved their worries. As I collected my thoughts to write this chapter, I happened to see two former members of the PSLLC. I asked them, again, if they had thought about the possibility of the project failing. One reiterated his original position. He had concerns. Once we settled on a division of subjects and a timeline for delivery, he was satisfied. The other confessed to more concern than she reported at the time. She also noted that she had confidence in my project management skills and knew my sense of responsibility. She trusted me to guide the PSLLC to a positive conclusion.

Throughout the project, I have been touched by the generosity of the members of the PSLLC. They agreed to participate in a new type of group. They volunteered to create a new orientation program. They invested time outside of the PSLLC meetings to complete our work and meet important deadlines. They made a year-long commitment, yet continued with the project for four years. They extended themselves to our newest colleagues and offered support that they, themselves, had not received. They shared
pieces of themselves, and their families, with others in the PSLLC. And, they forged bonds of friendship and established a sense of membership within our group.

From my perspective, the PSLLC experience has been so valuable. It has been a transformational process for me. I have experienced the power of collaboration. I have witnessed, and benefited from, expressions of kindnesses. I have expanded my leadership practice by observing, mirroring, and adopting the skills demonstrated by others in the group. And I have developed deep friendships.

This experience was likely supported by elements of Rowan’s history. Throughout the late 1990s and early 2000, President Farish urged the academic community to work towards “attaining the next level” of excellence (Farish, 2004, p.1). To this end, he initiated a wide variety of projects to enhance the university (Farish, 2004). These experiences helped the members of our academic community became familiar with the notion of ongoing change (P. Lewis, personal communication, December 2, 2010). This familiarity, coupled with a rich tradition of shared governance and a positive regard for past learning community initiative, may have lessened institutional resistance to the PSLLC and its efforts to create the orientation program. In addition, these factors might have contributed to the PSLLC members’ interest in joining the learning community program and eagerness in tackling such a challenging project. And, there factors probably contributed to my practice of leadership in all phases of the initiative.

Reflections on My Growth

Throughout my classroom studies, I was reluctant to identify myself as a leader. I have knowingly and carefully engaged in the practice of leadership, but the label,
“leader,” didn’t seem to fit me. I studied theory after theory, searching for a resource that would help me untangle my thoughts. Well-after I launched the PSLLC, I read Peggy McIntosh’s (1985, 1989, 2000) three-part series, “Feeling like a Fraud.”

In these pieces, McIntosh recounts her own internal struggles with the notion of leadership. She writes, eloquently and unapologetically, about the thorny feelings, “anxious, tenuous, out-of-place, misread, phony, uncomfortable” (McIntosh, 1985, p. 1), she experienced when she tried to force herself into pre-defined categories.

She explains that part of the problem is the “lack of fit between what one [actually] feels and what … is expected in [one’s] public behavior” (McIntosh, 1989, p. 1). She goes on to suggest one approach for resolving this tension, to develop “a double vision of social reality” (McIntosh, 1985, p. 7). She recommends the “both/and” perspective; learning “both the language of power [which is prevalent in the vertical world] … and the language of social change [which is prevalent in the non-vertical world]” (McIntosh, 1985, p. 7).

McIntosh’s work resonated with me. I have experienced the unsettling realization that one’s own perceptions of one’s place in the world do not align with the hierarchies imposed by society (McIntosh, 1985, 1989). I appreciate McIntosh’s candor in describing her experiences. It was comforting to know that other aspiring leaders have these feelings. I appreciated her ability to translate these experiences into the building blocks for growth. That is, her solution to her dilemma was to create a theory to ground and to guide her movement between worlds (1985). By the time I read her work, I had articulated my espoused theory of leadership and was referring to it when I was not sure
how to proceed with the project. I was comforted by the similarity between her recommendation and my path.

McIntosh urges her reader to allow him- or herself time - time to test ideas in practice, time to reflect on one’s accumulated experience, and time to grow comfortable operating in different worlds (1985, 1989). She recommends patience as one discovers one’s own authentic practice. As it happens, the learning community project spanned a five year period, from June 2005 to June 2010. It provided me with the time, and the resources, I needed to grow into my leadership aspirations.

My role changed as the project evolved. As I gained experience as a facilitator, I developed confidence to take on more difficult duties, such as talking to inactive members of the group or guiding the group to the end of the PSLLC experience. At the same time, I developed close relationships with several members of the PSLLC. I know my practice was supported by the “warm climate” of care and mutual respect, we established in the group (Knowles, 1975) and the security of having allies to help me to find the right words to convey a delicate message, process my feelings in times of frustration, and renew my enthusiasm for our work (Mezirow, 2000).

At times, this project demanded a great deal of emotional and mental energy. I was fortunate that the members shared my commitment to our project. My affection for the group motivated me to continually learn new skills and research strategies that might benefit the group (Hooker & Csikzentmihalyi, 2003). A passage in Kezar and Lester’s (2009) work captures the sentiment, “I learned: how to integrate multiple members’ feedback, how to listen for consensus points, how to facilitate conflict resolution, how to make people feel included, and other skills…important to succeed in collaborative work”
I also worked on expanding my tolerance for ambiguity. And, with the encouragement of selected members of the PSLLC, I gradually started to see myself as a leader.

I made a slow transition from talking about my leadership activities, to claiming my leadership contributions, to seeing myself as a leader. This transition required time, conversation, and careful consideration of the effects of my actual practice. While reflecting on my leadership was not my favorite part of this experience, it did yield useful information. My journal entries, my meeting notes, the PSLLC evaluation data, and the interview comments provided compelling evidence that my leadership practice was predicated on building relationships, enacting my core principles, identifying learning opportunities embedded in the PSLLC’s processes, and channeling the group’s collective effort toward enhancing the common good (Blackmore, 1989; Foster, 1989; Gronn, 2002; Huber, 1998; Klenke, 1996; Kouzes & Posner, 2002; Rothman & Tropman, 1987; Spillane, 2002; Spillane & Sherer, 2004). These findings suggested that my actual practice was largely consistent with my espoused theory of leadership. I shared this happy observation with a critical friend, who made the unsettling suggestion that some elements of my practice aligned with the theory of transformational leadership. My initial reaction was to disagree, but, at my friend’s request, I agreed to re-visit the literature.

Considering Transformational Leadership.

I re-read Burns’ (1978) discussion of transforming leadership, which emphasizes mobilizing people, building a sense of collective identify, and rising above self-interest. I also studied Bass’ (1990) discussion of transformational leadership, which emphasized
developing followers’ skills, promoting their awareness of their core values, and creating conditions for followers to become leaders. I did see the similarities with my practice, but I did not feel there was a fit.

I then read Yukl’s (1999) critique of the theory. He describes a transactional leader as one who “takes actions that will empower followers and make them partners in the quest to achieve important objectives” (p. 301). He points out the “heroic leadership bias” (p. 292) in the theory and calls for “greater emphasis on reciprocal influence processes and more explicit [work on] with issues of shared and distributed leadership” (p. 310). His analysis raised a significant, and emotional, point for me.

Uncovering an Assumption.

I contacted another critical friend and asked for his help in exploring my reaction to the labels “leader” and “follower.” In this a difficult conversation, I stumbled across a critical preconscious assumption. I was experiencing a clash of values. That is, in the course of this project, I revisited my community development experiences, and my social work studies, many times in search of strategies to support the PSLLC’s process. Along the way, I had re-activated deeply held assumptions and values from my time in the social work profession. This included sensitivity to issues of status and power in group processes. Indeed, my social work studies had trained me to see myself as “an enabler and an encourager” (Meenaghan, Gibbons, & McNutt, 2005, p. 104), not a leader; my duty was to help “move [the group] to where the people wanted to go – not [to direct them] where [I] would like them to go” (Cnaan & Rothman, 1995, p. 245). This helped to explain my reluctance to identify as the leader and my feeling regarding the labels.
Once I was aware of these assumptions, I could take steps to minimize the impact they had on my thinking (Mezirow, 1991). This included, as Cranton and King (2003) suggest, seeking “ideas and evidence from others to help [me] consider [my] views in a different light” (p. 32). I reached out to critical friends for advice and was reminded that different disciplines use different vocabularies to describe the same concepts (Mezirow, 1991). My friends recommended readings that discussed transformative leadership in terms that were more familiar to me.

Reconsidering Transformational Leadership.

One critical friend pointed me to Rose’s (1992) work. She describes a transformational leader as:

enabling and empowering. This type of leader is able to envision a future state and then empower subordinates to work to achieve it. This skill involves both rational and emotional elements, such as inquisitiveness, the ability to plan, intuition, imagination, and insight. Finally, such an approach involves an aspect of consciousness-raising in that the leader must be able to help subordinates see old problems in a new light and therefore see the possibilities for innovation and change. (p. 89)

Another referred me to Kouzes and Posner’s (2002) work. These authors suggest that when leaders employ a ‘committing’ style - one that ‘engages people in the journey. They lead in such a way that everyone on the journey helps shape its course. As a result, enthusiasm inevitably builds along the way.’ (Mintzberg, 1994 as cited in Kouzes & Posner, 2002, p. 153)
They describe this committing style as transformational leadership and note that this leadership dynamic is infused with dialogue to discover common understandings (Kouzes & Posner, 2002).

I considered these perspectives on transformational leadership. Now, I could see that some of these elements are present in my practice, particularly notions of enabling and raising consciousness. Indeed, my practice is shaped by these commitments, which I failed to recognize because of disciplinary blind-spots (Argyris & Schon, 1992; Bell, 1997; Kouzes & Posner, 2002; Senge 1990). These commitments are at the heart of community-based social work. They are so central to the group-process approach that I had taken them as “givens.” In a higher education setting, however, they are not automatic elements of the collaborative dynamic.

Reflections on My Leadership Theory

Based on this new information, I have proposed a revision to my leadership theory. This new model, which is depicted in Figure 11.1, links transformational leadership theory to my core model. The transformational perspective will offer me a new lens for studying my practice as I embark on the next segment of my leadership journey.
Figure 11.1. My revised leadership platform.
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APPENDIX A

Institutional Review Board Approval Forms
Rowan University
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
HUMAN RESEARCH REVIEW APPLICATION

INSTRUCTIONS: Check all appropriate boxes, answer all questions completely, include attachments, and obtain appropriate signatures. Submit an original and two copies of the completed application to the Office of the Associate Provost for Research Expediter(s): Be sure to make a copy for your files.

FOR IRB USE ONLY:
Protocol Number: IRB-2007-166
Received: Reviewed:
Exemption: Yes No
Category(ies):
Approved (date)

Step 1: Is the proposed research subject to IRB review?
All research involving human participants conducted by Rowan University faculty and staff is subject to IRB review. Some, but not all, student-conducted studies that involve human participants are considered research and are subject to IRB review. Check the accompanying instructions for more information. Then check with your class instructor for guidance as to whether you must submit your research protocol for IRB review. If you determine that your research meets the above criteria and is not subject to IRB review, STOP. You do not need to apply. If you or your instructor have any doubts, apply for an IRB review.

Step 2: If you have determined that the proposed research is subject to IRB review, complete the identifying information below.

Project Title: Perceptions of the Faculty and Professional Learning Community Project at Rowan University

Researcher: Kate Boland
Department: Educational Leadership (Ed.D. Candidate) Location: Education Hall
Mailing Address: 1105 Wharton Road Mount Laurel, NJ 08054
E-Mail: boland@rowan.edu Telephone: (856) 256-4474

Co-Investigator(s):

Faculty Sponsor (if student)*: Dr. Burt Sisco
INSTRUCTIONS: Check all appropriate boxes, answer all questions completely, include attachments, and obtain appropriate signatures. Submit an original and two copies of the completed application to the Office of the Associate Provost for Research Expediter(s): Be sure to make a copy for your files.

Step 1: Is the proposed research subject to IRB review?
All research involving human participants conducted by Rowan University faculty and staff is subject to IRB review. Some, but not all, student-conducted studies that involve human participants are considered research and are subject to IRB review. Check the accompanying instructions for more information. Then check with your class instructor for guidance as to whether you must submit your research protocol for IRB review. If you determine that your research meets the above criteria and is not subject to IRB review, STOP. You do not need to apply. If you or your instructor have any doubts, apply for an IRB review.

Step 2: If you have determined that the proposed research is subject to IRB review, complete the identifying information below.

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Project Title: Perceptions of the Faculty and Professional Learning Community Project at Rowan University

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Researcher: Kate Boland
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Co-Investigator(s): 

Faculty Sponsor (if student): Dr. Burt Sisco
Department: Educational Leadership Location: Education Hall
APPENDIX B

Informed Consent Forms
INFORMED CONSENT
Participants in the Faculty and Professional Learning Communities Workshop
June 2006

I agree to participate in a study presently entitled, “Introducing Faculty and Professional Learning Communities at Rowan University,” conducted by Kate Boland, a doctoral candidate in the Department of Educational Leadership. The purpose of this project is to study the process of developing the Faculty and Professional Learning Community Program at Rowan University.

I have been informed that Ms. Boland will collect field notes during the workshop program and that all data will be held in the strictest confidence. I agree that the information obtained in these field notes may be used in any way thought best for dissertation, discussion, presentation, or publication purposes provided that my name and identity are not revealed.

I understand that the collection of field notes poses no physical or psychological risk to the participants. I understand that I am free to withdraw my participation at any time.

If I have any questions or concerns regarding my participation in this study, I may contact: Ms. Boland (856) 256-4474 or her dissertation chair, Dr. Burt Sisco (856) 256-3717.

Signature of Participant Date

Signature of Investigator Date
INFORMED CONSENT

Participants in the Professional Staff Learning Community

I agree to participate in a study presently entitled, "Introducing Faculty and Professional Learning Communities at Rowan University," conducted by Kate Boland, a doctoral candidate in the Department of Educational Leadership. The purpose of this project is two-fold: to study the process of developing Faculty and Professional Learning Communities at Rowan University and to study Ms. Boland's leadership over the course of the project.

I agree to participate in the Professional Staff Learning Community. I have been informed that Ms. Boland will collect data over the course of the project. Data will be collected through field notes, interviews, and surveys. The field notes will focus on the group's process and Ms. Boland's practice of leadership during the learning community meetings. The one-on-one interviews will focus on my perceptions of my experience in the learning community. The surveys will focus on my assessment of the learning community experience and my perceptions of Ms. Boland's leadership practice.

I have been informed that all data will be held in the strictest confidence. I agree that the information obtained may be used in any way thought best for dissertation, discussion, presentation, or publication purposes, provided that my name and identity are not revealed.

I understand that participation in the Professional Staff Learning Community poses negligible physical or psychological risk to the participants. I understand that I am free to withdraw my participation at any time.

If I have any questions or concerns regarding my participation in this study, I may contact: Ms. Boland (856) 256-4474 or her dissertation chair, Dr. Burt Sisco (856) 256-3717.

Signature of Participant          Date

Signature of Investigator         Date
INFORMED CONSENT

Interviews

I agree to participate in a study presently entitled, "Introducing Faculty and Professional Learning Communities at Rowan University," conducted by Kate Boland, a doctoral candidate in the Department of Educational Leadership. The purpose of this project is to study the process of developing the Faculty and Professional Learning Community initiative and introducing it to the Rowan community. This phase of the project is focused on the perceptions and opinions of Rowan faculty and professionals relative to the initiative.

I agree to participate in a semi-structured interview. The interview will consist of a taped, thirty-minute discussion of my perceptions of the Faculty and Professional Learning Community initiative. I may choose to skip any question I do not wish to answer.

I have been informed that all data will be held in the strictest confidence. I agree that the information obtained from this study may be used in any way thought best for dissertation, discussion, presentation, or publication purposes provided that my name and my identity are not revealed.

I understand that there are no physical or psychological risks involved in this study, and that I am free to withdraw my participation at any time.

If I have any questions or concerns regarding my participation in this study, I may contact: Kate Boland (856) 256-4474 or her dissertation chair, Dr. Burt Sisco (856) 256-3717.

Signature of Participant Date

Signature of Investigator Date
INFORMED CONSENT
PSLLC Evaluation Survey

I agree to participate in a study presently entitled, “Evaluation of the Learning Community Model Used in the Professional Staff and Librarian Learning Community,” conducted by Kate Boland, a doctoral candidate in the Department of Educational Leadership. The purpose of this project is to evaluate the model used to organize and manage the learning community.

I will be asked to complete a paper-and-pencil data collection instrument. The instrument does not include any identify information (such as name, title, or department). I understand that my participation is voluntary. I may choose to skip any question I do not wish to answer. I am free to withdraw my participation at any time.

I have been informed that all data will be held in the strictest confidence. I agree that the information obtained from this study may be used in any way thought best for dissertation, discussion, presentation, or publication purposes provided that my name and my identity are not revealed.

I understand that there are no physical or psychological risks involved in completing this data collection instrument. If I have any questions or concerns regarding my participation in this study, I may contact: Kate Boland (856) 256-4474 or Dr. Burt Sisco (856) 256-3717.

Signature of Participant Date

Signature of Investigator Date
APPENDIX C

Semi-Structured Interview Questions
SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Member of the Planning Group

Guiding Question

I’d like to talk with you about your thoughts on the learning community initiative.

Probes

- What are the advantages and/or disadvantages of participating in a FPLC?
- How is FPLC technology consistent and/or inconsistent with the dominant values, past experiences, and needs of potential participants?
- How effective/ineffective have the information sessions been in communicating this technology to potential participants?
- What do you think are the primary obstacles/supports to participation and how can the planning group address/leverage these concerns?
- What is your vision for this initiative -- short-term and long-term?

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Prospective Participants

Guiding Question

I’d like to talk with you about your thoughts on the learning community initiative.

Probes

- What are the advantages and/or disadvantages of participating in a learning community?
- What are the goals of the initiative and what is expected of participants?
- What do you think are the primary obstacles/supports for participation?
- What is the likelihood that you will submit an application for the first-cohort, for a later cohort, and why?
SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Director of the Initiative

Guiding Question

I'd like to talk with you about your thoughts on the learning community initiative.

Interview I: Probes

- Please summarize the project to date
- At the mid-point of the project, to what extent is the FPLC program consistent/inconsistent with initial your expectations for the project?
- What do you think are the principle strengths of the project? What are its weaknesses?
- How will you determine the success of the project?

Interview II: Probes

- How does the pilot year of the FPLC initiative compare to your initial vision for the project?
- What do you think are the principle strengths of the project? What are its weaknesses?
- What aspects of the project have been most satisfying? Most frustrating?
- What revisions will you make for the next cycle?
SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Learning Community Participants

Guiding Question

I'd like to talk with you about your experiences with the learning community.

Probes: Cycle 3

- Please summarize your experiences with the project to date.
- At the mid-point of the project, to what extend is the experience consistent/inconsistent with initial your expectations for the project.
- What do you think are the principle strengths of the project? What are its weaknesses?
- How will you determine your satisfaction with your experience in the learning community?

Probes: Cycle 4

- Why did you choose to participate in this project? How has the experience compared to your expectations?
- What have you learned or gained from the experience?
- How do you measure the significance or success of the project?
- What aspects of your experience in the learning community are most satisfying? Most frustrating?
- How did my leadership impact the learning community?
APPENDIX D

Orientation Session Evaluation Survey
Please assist in evaluating this Orientation. Your comments will help to improve this program!

(Please rate numerically) | Excellent | Good | Satisfactory | Needs Improvement | Poor Improvement
--- | --- | --- | --- | --- | ---
Manner of notification was appropriate | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1
Usefulness of the information | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1
Clarity of the presentation | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1
Organization of the material | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1
Overall quality of the Orientation | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1

How did you find out about the Orientation?

What did you like best about the Orientation?

What did you like least about the Orientation?

Would you recommend the Orientation to future New Hires? □ Yes □ No

Comments or suggestions for improvement:

Thank you for participating in The Professional Staff/Librarians/Coaches Orientation. Please return this sheet to an orientation presenter at the end of the session.
APPENDIX E

Orientation Follow-Up Survey
FOLLOW-UP SURVEY
PROFESSIONAL STAFF, LIBRARIANS, AND COACHES
ORIENTATION PROGRAM

The Professional Staff, Librarians, and Coaches Orientation Committee requests your cooperation in our efforts to assess the Orientation Program. We have developed a brief survey to collect feedback from colleagues who participated in the Orientation Sessions. Please take a few minutes to complete this survey.

Of course, your participation is voluntary and your responses are confidential. The data will be analyzed at the aggregate (group) level.

**Please return the completed survey to Kate Boland, Institutional Research & Planning, Bole Annex by Monday, December 1, 2008**

CONTENT OF THE ORIENTATION MANUAL/BINDER

1. Since attending the Orientation Session, how often have you referred to the Orientation Manual/Binder you received? (Circle one)
   
   a. 0 times
   b. 1-2 times
   c. 3-4 times
   d. More than 4 times

2. Which section (or sections) of the Orientation Binder have you consulted? (Circle all that apply)
   
   a. None
   b. History and Organizational Structure
   c. American Federation of Teachers (AFT)
   d. Rowan University Senate
   e. Recontracting
   f. Career Development/Professional Development
   g. Promotional Opportunities
   h. Educational Opportunities
   i. Employee Perks

3. What information, if any, should be added to Orientation Binder?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

4. Which of the programs or “perks” presented in the Orientation Binder, if any, have you utilized?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________
NETWORKING AND MEETING COLLEAGUES

5. Did the Orientation Session provide you with an opportunity to expand your professional network of colleagues at Rowan University? (Circle one)  
   a. Yes  b. No

6. Do you view the colleagues you met at the Orientation Session as resources for advice or assistance related to your employment at Rowan? (Circle one)  
   a. Yes  b. No

7. To date, have you reached out to any of these colleagues for advice or assistance? (Circle one)  
   a. Yes  b. No

DELIVERY OF THE PROGRAM

8. The Orientation Committee is considering a change in the method used to deliver content of the program, moving from a print version to an electronic version (that is, a website with links). Please let us know which format (print or electronic) you prefer, and the reason or reasons for your preference.

9. When, in your opinion, is the best time to present the Orientation Session to newly hired employees? (Circle one)  
   a. During the first month of service  
   b. During the first 3 months of service  
   c. During the first 6 months of service  
   d. During the first 12 months of service

YOUR COMMENTS

10. Additional Comments:

   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________

   THANK YOU FOR COMPLETING THIS SURVEY!
APPENDIX F

PSLLC Evaluation Survey
Evaluation of the Professional Staff & Librarian Learning Community

As facilitator of the Professional Staff & Librarian Learning Community, I would like to collect some information on your perceptions of the learning community experience. The data collected today will be used to evaluate the use of a learning community as a strategy for change and will be incorporated into my dissertation. Please note that your individual responses will not be attributed to you, your identity will not be revealed, and all data will be held in the strictest confidence. If you have any questions about this project, please contact Kate Boland at 256-4474 or Dr. Burt Sisco at 256-3717.

Section I

I am interested in your assessment of the relative importance of specific elements of the learning community, as well as your satisfaction with those elements.

Please read each statement. On the left-hand side of the survey, please indicate the degree of importance you believe this element plays in the success of the Professional Staff and Librarian Learning Community. (Scale: 1 = Very Unimportant, 2 = Somewhat Unimportant, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Somewhat Important, 5 = Very Important). On the right-hand side of the survey, please indicate your level of satisfaction with this element in your learning community experience. (Scale: 1 = Very Dissatisfied, 2 = Dissatisfied, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Satisfied, 5 = Very Satisfied).

Please circle one response on the left AND one response on the right of each statement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IMPORTANCE</th>
<th>SATISFACTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 = Very Unimportant</td>
<td>1 = Very Dissatisfied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 = Somewhat Unimportant</td>
<td>2 = Dissatisfied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 = Neutral</td>
<td>3 = Neutral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 = Somewhat Important</td>
<td>4 = Satisfied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 = Very Important</td>
<td>5 = Very Satisfied</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 2 3 4 5            1 2 3 4 5
I believe that members of the learning community developed the trust necessary for the participants to connect with each other.

1 2 3 4 5            1 2 3 4 5
I believe that the members of the learning community developed the openness necessary for the participants to share their thoughts without fear of retribution.

1 2 3 4 5            1 2 3 4 5
I believe that the members of the learning community developed the mutual respect necessary for the participants to coalesce as a group.
1 2 3 4 5 I believe that the members of the learning community developed the responsiveness necessary for participants to be respectful of each others' concerns and preferences.

1 2 3 4 5 I believe that the members of the learning community developed the spirit of collaboration necessary for participants to engage in productive discussions.

1 2 3 4 5 I believe that the members of the learning community developed the appreciation for differences necessary for participants to feel that their unique experiences are valued by the group.

1 2 3 4 5 I believe that the members of the learning community developed the group's direction and goals.

1 2 3 4 5 I believe that the facilitator directed the learning community's work.

1 2 3 4 5 I believe that the learning community's project is relevant to newly hired professional staff, librarians and coaches.

1 2 3 4 5 I believe that the members of the learning community can take pride in the quality of the product the group produced.

1 2 3 4 5 I believe that the time and effort the members of the learning community invested in the group was worthwhile.

1 2 3 4 5 I believe that the learning community experience includes opportunities for relationship building.

1 2 3 4 5 I believe that the members of the learning community developed a sense of commitment to the group.

1 2 3 4 5 I believe that being part of the learning community has increased the participants' sense of their ability to bring about change at Rowan University.

Section II:

Please provide a short answer to the following items.
Please describe your strongest memory of your learning community experience.

Please describe a positive aspect and a negative aspect of your experience with the learning community.

Please describe how your experience with the learning community compares to your experience on another university committee.

Did you encounter any challenges or obstacles to your participation in the learning community? If yes, please describe.

In recent months, fewer members of the learning community have participated in our meeting and orientation sessions. How would you explain this?

Other Comments:

Thank You!
APPENDIX G

Notes from Learning Community Workshop
Notes on Learning Community Workshop

The First Day

The Faculty and Professional Learning Community Program workshop was held June 14-15, 2006. Seventeen of the 29 learning community applicants participated. The participants shared a light breakfast on the first day before the start of the formal program. At the appointed time, Frances asked the participants to find a seat at one of the tables, which had been arranged in a large rectangle. Frances opened the session with a warm welcome, a brief overview of the history of faculty and professional learning communities, and a synopsis of this project. She also explained that the learning community project was the focus of my dissertation. I briefly described my research interests and requested the participants’ permission to collect data throughout the workshop. I answered questions on confidentiality and distributed the consent forms. I was pleasantly surprised by the level of support for my study.

The next activity was a round of introductions. Frances asked each participant to state his or her name, position at the university, years of service, and reasons for joining the project. The reason mentioned most often (10 times) was a desire to connect on an intellectual-level with others in community, though the desire to meet colleagues in different disciplines was mentioned almost as many times. Several wished to re-capture the feel of excitement they felt during their graduate school studies. Some spoke of their interest in expanding their knowledge of teaching strategies. Others expressed a strong interest in “doing something different.”

I noted that the participants were attentive throughout this activity. They sat upright and angled their bodies toward each speaker. Many were smiling. Some were
jotting notes. As the participants spoke, I noticed many areas of common ground. Just as I recorded this observation in my notes, Frances departed from the agenda and called for a break.

Given the number of activities we had scheduled in the morning session, I did not expect a break after such a short work session. I glanced at my watch, then around the room. I noticed that the participants had clustered in small groups at the snack table. I happened to overhear the conversation of the pair closest to me and realized that they were talking about a newly discovered common interest. Thinking this was a happy accident, I walked over to Frances to share my observation. I learned that the buzz of conversation was not a happy accident; Frances had recognized the rich material for community building and had intentionally created an opportunity for the participants to interact.

After a short break, Frances reconvened the group and presented an overview of the program. She spoke of recent developments in the field of higher education and at Rowan University. She acknowledged the changes to our “written and unwritten rules” and the resulting confusion. She explained the Faculty Center’s role in helping the campus adjust to the new realities and her reasons for launching this learning community program. Throughout this segment of the presentation, the participants seemed to pay close attention. I observed that all of the participants looked at Frances and many nodded or hummed in agreement.

The next segment of the presentation included the key features of the learning community model. Frances discussed her expectations of the facilitators and the participants. She explained that the facilitators were responsible for administrative tasks,
such as setting the meetings, arranging for the necessary materials, and maintaining
records. In addition, they were responsible for the process aspects of the experience,
such as opening and closing the meetings, setting boundaries for the discussion on topic,
and ensuring that all of the participants had a chance to contribute. She then explained
that the participants were expected to attend each of their group’s monthly meetings, to
follow-through on their project plans, and to engage with the other members of their
learning community. She reminded them to provide regular feedback to their facilitator,
so that concerns could be addressed before they became problems.

Having established this foundation, Frances asked the participants to work in pairs
on a think-pair-share exercise. The task was to identify two sets of goals – one set they
hoped to achieve for themselves and one set for their learning community. After 15
minutes, Frances re-convened the group and recorded each pair’s work on the board. She
then compared the group’s ideas to the programmatic and community building goals
discussed in the learning community literature. At this point, I noticed some participants
were shifting in their seats and shuffling their papers.

One participant interrupted the exercise. She asked to conclude this activity in
order to form the learning communities. Other participants nodded in agreement. Frances
readily agreed to the redirection. She asked the participants to call out topics and themes
as she recorded the ideas on the board - assessment, best practices in teaching the
sciences, evolution/devolution of higher education, theories of teaching (active learning,
problem-based learning), changing student demographics, a publication-focused writing
group, professional staff concerns, and information for the tenure track. When there
were no more ideas, Frances suggested a break for lunch.
A buffet lunch was set up at the far end of the room. As the participants stood in line, the planning group organized theme-based stations all around the room. Frances directed the participants' attention to the stations and suggested that they visit the stations of interest during lunch and throughout the afternoon. She encouraged the participants to “shop” their project ideas and to identify the group of colleagues whose interests complimented their own.

At this point, I shifted from an observer to a learning community facilitator. Over lunch, my peers and I began the slow process of getting to know one another. We started by chatting about the morning session and our positions within the university. I joked about an assignment I had avoided by attending this workshop. One member of the learning community mentioned a project she was working on for another member’s supervisor, which started to establish the linkages that connected the group. By the middle of the afternoon, the members were sharing Rowan stories.

The workshop ended and I returned to my office. A member of the professional staff learning community was waiting for me. After our chat, I made this entry in my journal. “Member 8 just came over to talk to me about the workshop. And he was so excited. He recounted the day in such an animated way - moving his hands, excited tone of voice, laughing - and told me how much he enjoyed the workshop and how much he looked forward to the experience. The whole encounter was so unexpected and so positive. Just as Member 8 departed, my supervisor wandered over. She was all smiles as she congratulated me on a great first day. Apparently Member 8 told her all about the workshop. She was pleased that we were both happy and excited about the project. She
offered office resources to support the learning community – lunch money, copies, meeting space, whatever. I was touched. What an amazingly great way to end the day!”

The Second Day

The second day of the workshop started with another informal breakfast. After 30 minutes, Frances asked the participants to join their learning community and prepare a brief overview of the group’s earlier discussion. One participant pointed out that some people were considering multiple groups. Frances offered to talk with those folks and help them make a selection. I made this observation, “I hear lots of chatting and laughing as folks settled into their learning community groups. There is an easy comfort in the room – no anxious eyes, no tense shoulders, and no crossed arms. I see a nice sense of togetherness. It developed pretty quickly!”

Frances reconvened the large group and each community outlined its ideas. Since the projects were in the earliest stages of development, there was minimal discussion.

Frances then led the large group through some community building activities, which generated more discussion. When the conversation turned to the scholarship of teaching and learning, I notice that faculty members from a specific college were dominating the conversation. I noticed other participants shifting in their seats. One member of the professional staff group added her thoughts. She said that this discussion was defining education as something that happens in the classroom. However, only a small piece of learning, growth, and student development actually occurs in the classroom. In her opinion, to discount the connections and contributions that occur everywhere else, on- and off-campus, missed the point. Another member of the professional staff group spoke of the assistance his college-aged daughter received from
her academic advisor. The faculty in the room did not respond to these comments. The two dominant participants returned to their prior conversation. In my notes, I wrote, "disrespectful." The two-person discussion continued as other participants shuffled papers and looked out the window. When I saw one person roll her eyes, I asked for a break.

Frances motioned for the members of the planning group to come to the front of the room. As I walked away from my seat, one member of my learning community muttered that she was glad that we had our own group. The planning group agreed that two people had dominated the last discussion. Frances reminded us that, as the facilitators we had to intervene when that type of thing happens. She acknowledged that it can be difficult to do and promised to research strategies to help the facilitators fulfill this duty.

Following the break, the participants met with their learning communities again. The professional staff's conversation centered on obstacles and challenges we had encountered. Since so many participants had encountered the same problems, the discussion was actually quite funny. By lunch, we had decided to create an orientation program and had identified a number of discussion topics. We had also scheduled our first learning community meeting.

The workshop ended after lunch, though the learning communities were welcome to continue meeting into the afternoon. I spoke with Frances before I returned to my office. She was not sure if there might be two other learning communities, or perhaps three.
Notes on the Consensus Workshop Method

The consensus workshop method includes five stages: contexting, brainstorming, clustering, naming, and resolving (Institute of Cultural Affairs, 2000). The first step, contexting, is designed to establish the importance of a topic and to explore the significance of the topic for each individual member and for the group. The PSLLC had discussed the need for a orientation program at the summer workshop and in our first meeting. We reviewed the significance of the project, in terms of expectations, in the preceding exercise.

We moved on to the second step of the process, brainstorming. The group had engaged in some brainstorming during the workshop, so I explained that we were going to pool individual ideas into a larger vision. I asked each member to generate seven ideas, issues, or concerns that he or she would like to incorporate in the orientation program and to record each idea on a different card.

I collected the cards, one card per person, and read the ideas aloud as I posted the cards on the wall. I repeated the process with the second set of cards. I selected a card and, noting that the purpose of my question was to gather more information, not to debate a point, I asked the author for more detail. We continued this process, posting and discussion the ideas, until I posted a card listing an idea similar to one that was already posted.

One of the authors suggested removing her card, but another member asked both authors to elaborate on their ideas. He wanted to be sure that the ideas were, in fact, the same. We continued in this until all of the cards were posted, in a random fashion, on the
wall. I read all of the ideas and asked the group if any ideas were missing. We generated a few more cards, which I posted.

I then introduced the third step, clustering. The purpose of this step is to identify relationships that link the ideas together. It evoked a lot of discussion in the PSLLC, because the authors were called upon to clarify their ideas and reaction to the proposed groupings. As the members offer insights, I re-positioned the cards so that those containing related ideas together (in a cluster). I moved cards from one cluster to another in response to alternative groupings. When the group was satisfied with the items in each cluster, I rearranged each cluster into a neat column. I asked if the relationships still made sense. The group agreed that they did.

We then transitioned to the fourth step, naming. The task is to assign a name to each cluster, with the stipulation that the name had to apply to every idea in the column. This proved to be a bit tricky, and some cards were shuffled to different clusters. By the end of the meeting, we had established eight clusters: directory of resources, career ladder, governance, meet and greet, professional development, recontracting, university structure, and welcome/initial information. I pointed out that these columns represented the major topics for the orientation program. Since we were running out of meeting time, I suggested postponing the fifth and final step, resolving, to the next meeting. Everyone nodded in agreement.
APPENDIX I

Notes from Pilot Orientation Sessions
Notes from Pilot Orientation Sessions

The First Session

The first orientation session was held March 8, 2007. The members of PSLLC arrived first and there was a buzz of activity. Members re-positioned desks to form a semi-circle, unpacked the orientation materials, and posted signs to direct the participants to our classroom. I sensed some nervous energy. One member paced, while another flipped through the pages of orientation manual. A small group was fussing with the arrangement of the table cloth and the utensils on the buffet table.

I saw the designated “greeter” standing alone near the door to the classroom. She was organizing the orientation manuals, sign-in sheet, and extra pens. I thought she might like some company and approached her table. She turned to me and said, “I think we are ready.” Before I could respond, Participant 4 boomed, “We are!” His enthusiasm sliced through the tension. The members were laughing as the first participant arrived.

The participants arrived alone or in pairs. Though we were expecting a total of 10 participants, but only five had arrived by the designated time. The greeter introduced the participants to each other and distributed the orientation manuals while the other members of the PSLLC conferred. We elected to delay the start of the program for a few minutes. When no additional participants arrived, I turned to the first presenter and whispered, “Whenever you’re ready.”

The members of the learning community who were scheduled to present sat at desks in the semi-circle. The others stood towards the back of the room. The first presenter walked to the front of the room and opened the session with a warm welcome. She provided a brief history of the learning community and the orientation program. She
recalled a struggle from her early years at the institution and the lack of resources. She said, “The members of the learning community have seen the good, the bad, and the ugly. We know all kinds of things happen. We are hoping that this orientation, and the manual, and the people here today, will make it easier for you.” She urged the participants to contact the members of the PSLLC with questions or problems. She even pointed out the contact information on the second page of orientation binder. “We can help you find answers,” she said, “and we can help you get in touch with the person who can help you.”

I made the following observation, “[The presenter] laid out the context for this project. She found the right tone. She acknowledged the problems, and the historic lack of resources, without apology or drama. Just the facts. She explained what the PSLLC had done and is doing to improve the situation. She spoke in a clear, calm tone. She made eye-contact and did not use notes. She projected confidence. She held the participants’ attention. They sat up-right, leaned forward, and looked directly at her.”

The first presenter also initiated a round of introductions. She started with the orientation participants. Each person stated his or her name, position, office, and duration of service. While some of participants had joined the university within the last three months, others had with Rowan for a year (or longer). The presenter than asked the members of the learning community to introduced themselves. Each person identified him- or herself as well as his or her areas of expertise, such as the AFT, the Senate, or recontracting.

Having completed her tasks, the first presenter introduced the second presenter. As the second presenter made his way to the front of the room, one member flashed a big smile to the first presenter and several others offered a silent round of applause. The
second presenter then provided a summary of the institution’s history and organizational structure. This material, which included lots of dates and names, was dull. The presenter relied, heavily, on his notes. I saw the participants flipping through the pages of the orientation manual and gazing around the classroom.

The second presenter finished his remarks, asked for questions, and then introduced the third presenter. The third presenter was especially dynamic. She chatted with the participants, by name, about their assignments as she walked toward them. While the earlier presenters stood at the front of the room, this presenter sat one of the empty desks. She positioned herself to be with, rather than in front of, the participants. I glanced to the back of the room, wondering whether the other members of the learning community had noticed what I noticed. Several had. One member mouthed “Wow,” while two others made faces that I interpreted as “Impressive”

The third presenter spoke about the AFT and the Senate. She was every effective in blending general information with personalized tips. That is, she explained the concept of shared governance, and then pointed out specific committees that might be of interest to specific participants. She explained the role of the union plays in contract negotiations and pointed out the opportunities for peer-networking and community engagement available through the AFT. She maintained eye contact with the participants. I noted that four of the five participants were smiling and nodding, a lot. Two were leaning so far forward on their desks that they were sitting on the edge of their seats.

Near the end of the third presenter’s remarks, two additional participants entered the classroom. The presenter seamlessly integrated them into the group. She greeted
them, introduced herself, and invited them to join the semi-circle. Signaling for two additional orientation manuals, she facilitated a quick round of introductions. She helped the new participants turn to the right section of the manual, completed her presentation, and introduced the next presenter.

The fourth presenter stood at the desk the third presenter vacated. He welcomed the new additions to the group and offered to meet at the end of the session to review any content they missed. He then reviewed the recontracting process. His delivery was animated and humorous. Most of the participants were taking notes and nodding, but one sat back in his chair with his arms crossed at his chest. This participant interrupted the speaker to say that the recontracting process was a clearly a waste of time, given his years of experiences in his field. He said that he did not plan to participate in it. I saw the six other participants exchange glances. A few looked back at me. I didn’t know how the presenter would respond, but I nodded in his direction.

When all of the participants were looking in his direction, the presenter noted the consequences for failing to complete the recontracting process. He also articulated the benefits and protections associated with successfully completion of the process. He then spoke of the recent revisions to the recontracting agreement and the new supports in place to assist recontracting candidates. I added these comments to my notes, “Well, I never imagined that a new person would try stir up trouble during our first orientation session. I was quite impressed with the way [the presenter] defused that situation. He acknowledged that the participant did have a choice and provided information to help the participant make an informed one. His delivery was confident, clear, informed, and in control. Very effective.”
This presenter also presented the next two sections of the orientation program, professional development and career development. He made connections between the terms of the recontracting agreement and the opportunities to develop one’s skills and pursue promotions. He pointed out the resources available. The participants followed along in their orientation manuals. Some made notes, and one participant had questions about funding for conferences.

By the time the fourth presenter reintroduced the second presenter, who was to deliver the content in the last two sections of the program, lunch had arrived. While the second presenter discussed educational opportunities and other “employment perks,” four members of the learning community set-up the buffet lunch. I noticed that the presenter struggled to hold the participants’ attention; some of the participants were rubbing their heads and shifting in their seats. One passed a tin of mints to the participant to her left. Another member of the learning community must have noticed these movements, because he raised his hand to clarify a point about leaves of absence. Then another spoke of her favorite perks, the childcare center and the fine arts performances. The participants turned around in their seats, looking at these speakers.

This shift in focus signaled the unofficial end of the presentation segment of the program. Though the presenter had not completed his presentation, the participants and the members of the learning community were talking and interacting. I thanked the presenter for his remarks and directed the participants’ to the buffet table. When the participants and some members of the learning community made their lunch selections, one member placed an evaluation form on each participant’s desk and two other members rearranged the desks in a large circle.
The last segment of the program was an informal discussion over pizza, salad, and homemade brownies. At the start of the segment, there were several concurrent small group discussions. One participant called my name and asked a question about recontracting. Gradually, the small group discussions faded into a large group discussion of Rowan's culture and parking difficulties. As the two-hour period drew to an end, I told the participants that we would appreciate hearing their feedback and asked that they complete the evaluation survey. To my surprise, all seven participants approached me with kind words about the program.

Feedback and Reactions

I recorded more observations in my field notes while two members of the learning community cleaned the room and another repositioned the desks in rows. When the last participant left the room, one member shut the door and the four of us sat down to talk. First, we congratulated ourselves on putting together a successful program. Then, we talked about our general impressions of the session. And then, we talked about specific impressions. I mentioned my pleasure in discovering more of our members' hidden talents. A member said that she had been very impressed with certain members' presentation skills. Another noted her awe at the way one presenter handled a difficult participant. The fourth member, who was a strong public speaker, revealed that he had learned a few tricks from his fellow presenters. I thanked the members for their contributions in translating our good intentions into a great program. And we all headed back to our offices.
The Second Session

The PSLLC hosted the second orientation session on March 15. Again, several participants were not able to attend the session due to unexpected work responsibilities. With only two participants in attendance, all of the members of the learning community joined the semi-circle. This seating arrangement, coupled with an absence of the nervous energy, contributed to this session’s more conversational tone. The first presenter welcomed the participants and started her presentation. While her delivery was as clear and confident as the first session, her remarks were a little bit more polished. For example, she provided a very brief overview of each section and introduced each of the presenters. She also pointed out that some of the materials might not be applicable at the current time, so the participants should refer to the orientation manual again in a few months.

As I observed this session, I made comparisons to the first session. Some aspects remained the same; the sections of the program that were dull in the first session were also dull in the second session. Some were different. I heard a fair amount of teasing and laughter throughout the second session. The presenters added more context to their remarks. Several members contributed their own reflections on recontracting, career development, and “perks” to the presenters’ prepared comments. At the end of the session, I distributed the evaluation form. One of the participants thanked the learning community for a warm and congenial orientation session.