

Peters, J. & Le Cornu, R. (2005). 'Beyond Communities of Practice: Learning Circles for Transformational School Leadership', Chapter 6 in P. Carden & T. Stehlik (eds) *Beyond Communities of Practice*, Queensland, Post Pressed.

**Authors:** Judy Peters & Rosie Le Cornu, School of Education, University of South Australia

**Contact Details:** [rosie.lecornu@unisa.edu](mailto:rosie.lecornu@unisa.edu); +61 8 83024498;  
[judith.peters@unisa.edu.au](mailto:judith.peters@unisa.edu.au); 61 8 83024603;

## **Beyond Communities of Practice: Learning Circles for Transformational School Leadership**

### **Abstract:**

This chapter draws on our experiences of working as university colleagues in Learning Circles in a South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS) curriculum redesign initiative entitled Learning to Learn. These Learning Circles involve designated school leaders from 6-8 schools/sites coming together twice a term with Departmental curriculum officers and university colleagues. In the Learning Circles participants reflect on and share their insights, tensions and dilemmas as leaders of the change process, and grow their understanding of the process. Drawing on the meaning, practice, community and identity framework of Wenger (1998) we illuminate some of the key insights about learning communities and transformational leadership that have emerged. It will be argued that the Learning Circles proved to be an effective structure for school leaders as learners. They not only provided opportunities for participants to engage in co-construction of knowledge about leading the redesign process but they also provided a structure for school leaders to help manage the emotional dimension of the change process.

## **Introduction**

The Learning to Learn Project is a South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS) curriculum redesign initiative. Its goal is to achieve school-based and systemic change through the collaborative redesign of learning environments at the local level. Its development and implementation are informed by social constructivist learning theory and thinking around the power of learning communities and transformational leadership. In its focus on learning through the social construction of knowledge, Learning to Learn has many facets that have some degree of congruence with Wenger's (1998) conceptual framework of learning within communities of practice. In particular his key concepts of community, meaning, practice and identity are ones that resonate with the experiences of the teachers and leaders involved in the Project. In this chapter these four concepts provide the framework for highlighting some of the insights about transformational leadership and developing learning communities that have emerged through school leaders' collaborative work in Learning Circles.

## **Background**

The Learning to Learn Project was initiated in 1999. Since then funding has been provided to over 150 schools, in three successive phases, to enable teachers and school leaders to engage in site-based professional development and a Core Learning Program provided by leading edge national and international educational theorists. Participants in the project are committed to redesigning learning environments in ways that optimise learning opportunities and outcomes for teachers and students. Principals and designated change leaders from 6-8 schools come together in Learning Circles twice a term with Departmental curriculum officers and university colleagues. These Learning Circles provide them with the opportunity to reflect on and share their challenges, tensions, dilemmas, insights and strategies as leaders of the change process, and to grow their understanding of the process.

For the past five years we have had the privilege of working as University Colleagues and critical friends with 3 - 4 Learning Circles in each of the three phases of the Project. In the past two years we have also been involved in some research with an informal Learning Circle called the Stewards Group. This was formed by a group of leaders who moved from one school to another part way through their involvement in the Learning to Learn Project. They formed a network to meet regularly and share their learning about their transition from schools in which they were acknowledged leaders of learning, to schools where they had to forge this role anew. In a further study we worked with four teachers in two Learning to Learn schools to illuminate their experiences as they engaged in transformational work at the classroom level.

The Learning to Learn foci on collaborative school-based redesign and supporting school leaders' learning through Learning Circles derive from a social constructivist view of learning which underpins the Project as a whole. It suggests that learning should be 'participatory, proactive, communal, collaborative and given over to the construction of meanings rather than receiving them (Bruner 1996, p. 84). The Learning Circles were formed in response to current thinking about the importance of learning communities (see for example Lieberman, 2000; Cochran-Smith & Lytle;

1999; Retallick, 1997). McLaughlin defined a learning community as a group of people, not necessarily from the same organisation, who are:

self-consciously organised around learning, reflection and collective development of practice. [They] come to resemble 'knowledge collectives', where responsibility for students' and colleagues' learning is shared. (McLaughlin, 1997, p. 85)

Their purpose in meeting as a group is to support each other in the process of personal transformation by providing the necessary conditions of 'continuity, thinking, support, reflection, feedback and encouragement to change for one another' (Collay, Dunlap, Enloe and Gagnon, 1998, p xvii). Collay et al. used the terms learning community and learning circle interchangeably to describe such groups. Theory about learning communities is also the basis of much of the redesign work in the participating schools.

A further influence on the decision to develop Learning Circles to support school leaders' learning was current thinking about 'transformational leadership' (see for example Hallinger, 2003). It has been argued that school leaders are critical in school reform endeavours (see for example Day, Harris, Hadfield, Tolley & Beresford, 2000, Peters, Dobbins and Johnson, 1996) and that their leadership should be transformative. Such leadership is focussed on 'developing the organisation's capacity to innovate' and 'viewed as distributive in that it focuses on developing a shared vision and commitment to school change (Hallinger, 2003, pp. 330-331). For these reasons it was seen as critical that school leaders should have the opportunity to share and develop their learning about leading the redesign process with others in the Project facing similar challenges, and with the help of critical friends constituted by the Departmental curriculum officers leading the project and university colleagues.

The Learning to Learn Learning Circles share some characteristics of communities of practice, as they are described by Wenger (2002, cited in Dugage, 2002), in that each is 'a group of people who share an interest in a domain of human endeavour and engage in a process of collective learning that creates bonds between them' (p. 3). However, there are also significant differences in that communities of practice evolve naturally, for indefinite amounts of time, when people are united by commonalities of practice and purpose. Therefore, they 'come together, they develop, they evolve, they disperse, according to the timing, the logic, the rhythms, and the social energy of their learning' (Wenger, 1998, p. 96). Learning Circles, on the other hand, are mandated for principals of schools accepted into the Project and one to two other teachers from the school who are designated as change leaders. They occur at regular intervals for the period of the schools' funded lives in the Project (usually two or more years). Despite these differences, we argue that Wenger's (1998) key concepts of community, social practice, meaning and identity are integral to the transformative work of Learning to Learn school leaders. He summarised these four components of his 'new conceptual framework for thinking about learning' (p. 11) in the following way:

- community (learning as belonging) - the social configurations in which our enterprises are defined as worth pursuing and our participation is recognizable as competence;

- meaning (learning as experiences) - our changing ability to experience our life and the world as meaningful;
- practice (learning as doing) - the shared historical and social resources, frameworks, and perspectives that can sustain mutual engagement in action;
- identity (learning as becoming) - how learning changes who we are and creates personal histories of becoming in the contexts of our communities (Wenger, 1998, p. 5)

In the next section these concepts provide the framework for illuminating some of the key insights that have emerged from our work in Learning Circles. This section draws both on original data sources including observation and field-notes, interviews, audio tapes of meetings and documentation produced in meetings as well as a number of papers which were written during the last five years to present analytical findings. We use examples from both the Learning Circles themselves as well as the learning communities established in the Learning to Learn schools/sites for illustrative purposes.

### **Community – learning as belonging**

Wenger (1998) identified the characteristics of mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire for determining whether a group is a community (p. 73). These characteristics resonate with some of the characteristics we have identified in the learning communities encompassed in Learning Circles and Learning to Learn schools. These characteristics are:

- trusting and respectful relationships;
- a commitment to reciprocity; and
- a shared agenda.

#### ***Trusting and respectful relationships***

There appear to be close ties between Wenger's notion of mutual engagement, which he associated with the relationships developed by participants engaged in negotiating meanings with one another, and the emphasis on the development of trusting and respectful relationships in Learning to Learn. Relationship building is seen to be at the heart of developing positive learning environments in classrooms, schools and the Learning Circles. When interviewed, leaders in Learning to Learn schools reported that developing relationships with and between the members of their school communities was their highest priority. One leader, who felt that she had overlooked the importance of this when moving into a new school, put it this way:

There was no documentation, there was no paperwork or anything and I just panicked and went straight into that, when perhaps what I should have done is thought, it's been like this for X amount of years, I need to establish relationships first with all the kids and all the staff and then come to that. ((Stewards Group Interview).)

This importance of the leader's role in relationship building in school communities has been supported by recent studies of effective leadership (see for example Day et al, 2000; Moos, 2003) and might appear to be common sense, but most of the leaders

reported that it was easy to underestimate the amount of time and effort that should be spent on building relationships in the face of the many other competing priorities they face. Those that made building trust and respect their highest priority, found that they were able to move forward once relationships had been established. Those who initially focussed on other goals found that the suspicions and resistance of some school community members hindered progress towards these.

The development of productive relationships is also the highest priority in the first Learning Circles in each phase. Most of the leaders, project officers and university colleagues attending Learning Circles for the first time have never met before so there is an even greater impetus to spend time on establishing a sense of community. Because time is limited to two meetings a term, there is a deliberate focus on developing the notion of reciprocity to provide the basis for trusting and respectful interactions.

### ***A commitment to reciprocity***

Wenger's idea of mutual engagement resonates with another characteristic of the relationships fostered within Learning Circles and Learning to Learn schools which we have characterised as reciprocity (Peters, Le Cornu and Collins, 2003). By reciprocity we mean the development within learning communities, be they classrooms, schools or the Learning Circles, of learners' commitment to and responsibility for their own learning as well as that of the other members of the community. All participants are positioned as co-constructors of knowledge and co-learners, with an emphasis on the reciprocal nature of the learning process and the development of reciprocal ways of working.

According to Grossman, Wineburg & Woolworth (2001), 'the construction of community requires ongoing social negotiation including the regulation of social interactions and group norms' (p. 979). To ensure a safe reciprocal space for learning, one of the first things we do in each Learning Circle is a process of negotiating and making explicit the group norms. We ask the questions, 'What do you need to feel comfortable to participate and learn in this group?' and 'What might be some of the tensions?' The identified norms take the form of norms of support (such as trust and honesty, confidentiality, stability of membership and relationships/connections) and norms of challenge (such as rigour, permission to think differently, commitment to critical dialogue). During this process, we highlight the notion of reciprocity and explain that each person needs to come with the headset of what they can contribute as well as what they can take away. The focus on reciprocity seems central to effective participation in learning communities. In writing about the 'new technologies of collaboration' (p. 1), Schrage (1990) argued that successful collaboration requires a high level of cognitive involvement by participants, as well as a preparedness by them to contribute to the creation of a shared understanding.

Of course simply identifying such norms does not ensure that such conditions are immediately in place. Rather the development of these ways of working together takes place over the life of the Learning Circles. By the end of each phase most participants feel that they have become part of a community as can be seen by the following comment:

(We) built a group of people into true and trusted colleagues that were able to bare their learning souls and inspire great possibilities. (Phase 2 Learning Circle Evaluation Sheet)

Some leaders see the development of reciprocity within their school communities as part of developing shared leadership so that all staff take responsibility for sustaining their own and each other's learning, as well as for that of students. One leader referred to this as developing 'density of leadership' amongst the staff and described it in the following way:

It was a very open dialogue all the time....getting them to come up with their own learning and their own goals and so on. Through the Project it absolutely turned the whole culture of the school but it was something that needed time. (Stewards Group Interview).

### ***A shared agenda***

Another early focus in the development of Learning to Learn learning communities is the negotiation of a shared agenda. Wenger's (1998) communities of practice form naturally around a joint enterprise and also as a result of members having developed a shared repertoire of concepts, styles, artefacts, actions, stories, tools, historical events and discourses (p.74). Participants in Learning to Learn are engaged in the joint enterprise of educational redesign, while members of the Learning Circles have an additional shared focus on leadership. However, it cannot be assumed that all participants in Learning Circles or Learning to Learn schools have a shared understanding of, or commitment to, the identified focus.

The starting point for developing a shared agenda in school communities is for leaders to support their communities to develop a shared intention by envisioning the kind of learning environment and practices they want to develop, supported by a strong rationale (Le Cornu, Peters, Shin & Foster, 2002). In Phase 1 Learning Circles, leaders shared some of the ways that they had supported their school communities to move towards a shared vision for educational redesign. Some explained how they 'seeded' the vision, through a process of values clarification, to create dissonance between shared values and practice leading to emergent directions for redesign. For instance, one principal in a Learning Circle dialogue described the process of developing common vision in this way:

Lots of people worked in different roles in different faculties and so what we needed to do was to actually have a common vision. So we went away for a weekend and spent some time together, spent a lot of time - particularly clarifying our own values and beliefs and then looking at what that meant to the whole leadership team and what they meant for the school. (Phase 1 Learning Circle)

Once established, shared values and beliefs became like an internal compass for the school to use to review policies and practices and maintain focus on the vision. Leaders were able to recognise the interconnection of powerful learning and a sense of ownership of the agenda and new understandings that result from dialogue:

So in a sense you're not putting a vision out there, you just initiate a question and you structure a place for dialogue to happen, and then that's what emerges rather than directing people 'you have to do this'. (Phase 1 Learning Circle)

In the initial meetings of Learning Circles it is equally important for each group to negotiate a shared agenda around values, purposes, processes and content. We have used various processes to facilitate this negotiation including collaborative written surveys to identify priorities for each school group involved in the Learning Circle and a modified Delphi technique which enables individual voices to be heard while also determining priorities common to all group members. We have found that across all Learning Circles there has been a high degree of uniformity in broad priorities with most interest in 'exploring issues confronting leaders of changing schools', followed by interest in 'developing strategies for building effective learning communities'. Although these priorities provide overall direction for all Learning Circles, each group identifies specific focus issues and the agendas for forthcoming meetings in response to emergent needs.

That is not to say that every participant feels that his or her needs have been met through the negotiation of agendas, as can be seen by the following comment:

A big learning team although hard to see the focus (my problem I'm sure), especially as we talk about 'tough love' and dissonance and discomfort as a way forward, but little evidence of this and yes my fault as much as anyone else's. (Phase 2 Learning Circle Evaluation Sheet)

Unlike communities of practice Learning Circles do not begin with a shared repertoire as a group, but this evolves over the life of the Project in the form of shared experiences, processes, dilemmas, challenges, understandings, language and stories of change. As one participant wrote:

(Learning Circles have) greatly helped me understand the depth of learning in sites and the processes used by different leaders and staff. (Phase 2 Learning Circle Evaluation Sheet)

To summarise, Wenger's concept of community, or learning as belonging, can clearly be applied to the learning communities developed through Learning to Learn, which are characterised by respectful relationships, a commitment to reciprocity and a shared agenda.

### **Meaning – learning as experiences**

For Wenger (1998), meaning is located in the process of negotiating meaning and the two constituent processes of participation, the social experience of being a member of a community, and reification, the development of representations of negotiated meanings (p. 52). In Learning to Learn learning communities we have found that two similar processes have supported negotiation of meaning. These are:

- participation in structured learning conversations; and
- writing and analysing stories of significant change.

### *Participation in structured learning conversations*

Structured opportunities for interaction and what we have termed ‘learning conversations’ (Le Cornu, 2004; Peters et al., 2003) are central to the learning processes of Learning to Learn leaders, teachers and students. We have used the term ‘learning conversation’ to capture the dialogue-based approaches used in Learning to Learn classrooms, schools and Learning Circles. These conversations engage learners in deeper ways than ordinary conversations in that they enable them to negotiate new meanings and deeper levels of understanding. Feldman (1999) argued that conversations are a form of inquiry which enable people to ‘work through the dilemmas, quandaries and dissonances that relate to their living and being in the world’ (p. 137). Through our work in Learning to Learn we have found that such conversations do not just happen but are dependent on learners having the time, opportunity and meta-cognitive language, skills and processes to engage in them (Le Cornu, Peters & Collins, 2003).

The primary purpose of Learning Circles is for participants to share and develop their understandings about transformational leadership through interaction and discourse. They are structured to provide the conditions that enable participants to engage in learning conversations that normally are not possible in their daily work. Conditions include time and space away from the hectic nature of the workplace and the opportunity to interact with fellow leaders and critical friends. In Learning Circles we provide facilitated opportunities for participants to develop their meta-cognitive processes with a particular focus on processes which enable the surfacing and critical examination of the assumptions, beliefs, values and vested interests that underpin practice. For instance, early in the Phase 2 Learning Circles we asked participants to identify their sites’ foci for redesign at the top of a sheet of paper and then rotated these through small groups so that all members of the Learning Circle could contribute to the identification of assumptions which they perceived to be implicit within each focus.

Another process that a number of the Learning Circles have found to be particularly productive for learning conversations is to begin each meeting with the opportunity for each school group to share a challenge, tension or dilemma from their current redesign work. In Phase 3 Learning Circles we developed this process further by asking site groups to identify a significant challenge they were facing in their Learning to Learn redesign work and subject it to critical analysis using questions based on Smyth’s (1991) framework of describing, informing, confronting and reconstructing. The resulting insights were then taken into cross-site groups for further discussion, and finally each site group had the chance to reframe the challenge in the light of their critical analysis. The power of this process in reframing meaning can be seen in the change made by one leader to his original challenge. He originally framed his challenge as ‘Needing to successfully engage every staff member in Learning to Learn’, but was able to reframe it as ‘To find out about each staff member’s level of engagement in Learning to Learn and empower them individually’.

One of the main challenges that leaders identify is that of developing opportunities for learning conversations in their schools. Engaging in such conversations in Learning Circles enables them to trial a range of processes and adapt them for use in their own schools. Learning Circles also provide the opportunity for them to share successful

strategies they have developed in their schools, thereby learning from each others' experiences. Some of the strategies trialled in schools by leaders in Phase 1 Learning Circles included:

- spending time on clarifying values and developing a shared vision within their school communities
- introducing and using specific thinking tools such as brainstorming, De Bono's six hats and PMI (Plus, Minus, Interesting)
- establishing local learning circles or critical discussion groups for staff on a voluntary basis;
- providing release time for as many staff as possible to attend sessions in the Core Learning Program and additional time for them to 'make sense' of their new learning in small groups and share their insights with the wider staff (Le Cornu, Peters & Foster, 2002)

### *Analysing stories of significant change*

In addition to providing opportunities for negotiation of meaning through participation, Learning Circles also provide opportunities to engage in what Wenger (1998) termed 'reification' through the development of common interpretations and a shared language for depicting meaning. One example of the power of reification in negotiating meaning can be seen in a process we used with Phase 2 Learning Circles to deepen understandings of the complexity of change. Entitled the 'Most Significant Change Approach', the process was designed by Rick Davies as a tool for evaluating change projects and promoting organisational learning among participants (Davies, 1996). This process involves participants telling stories about what they perceive to be significant change, and engaging in a process of discussion and selection to identify those stories that are considered to be most illustrative of significant change. We worked with the Project Manager (Margot Foster) and Project Officers (Robyn Barratt and Diane Mellowship) to interpret and introduce the process in a number of the Learning Circles (see Le Cornu, Peters, Foster, Barratt and Mellowship, 2003). Participants wrote stories about changes that had occurred through their work in Learning to Learn. These were then shared and analysed to determine what had been significant domains of change across the sites and the indicators of positive change within each domain. For instance, one of the domains of change identified in one Learning Circle was 'conditions for deep learning', while some of the indicators related to these were 'tension and discomfort', 'asking questions', 'messiness' and 'deconstruction of terms'.

Having experienced the Most Significant Change process in Learning Circles, most leaders used the process with groups in their school communities such as teachers, students, parents and School Council members, resulting in many more insights about the characteristics of significant change that were specific to their local contexts.

There was agreement across all Learning Circles that the Most Significant Change Process was a powerful one for negotiating meaning around educational redesign. Analysis of written feedback provided by participants revealed that they valued it as a means of:

- promoting reflection and learning;

*It allowed time for deep conversations (we chose to do it pairs) revisiting the new information and knowledge which has helped our site to become a*

*Learning Community. Information which challenged our old paradigm of learning and (caused us to) view learning from a more powerful and inclusive way.*

- identifying and recording significant change;

*It captures things that matter instead of making what is measurable matter. It uncovers the story beneath the numbers and values teacher perceptions. It values the narrative and is non judgmental.*

- engaging other stakeholders in meaningful debate through involving them in the process at the local level (Le Cornu, Peters, Foster, Barratt & Mellowship, 2003).

It can be seen that the two processes of structured learning conversations and writing and analysing stories of significant change used in the Learning Circles resonate with Wenger's processes for negotiating meaning. Participants learnt through their experiences of participation in learning conversations and reification through story telling.

### **Practice – learning as doing**

According to Wenger, 'significant learning ... is what changes our ability to engage in practice, the understanding of why we engage in it, and the resources we have at our disposal to do so' (p. 95). This accords strongly with Learning to Learn's aim of improving teaching and student learning outcomes through the transformation of educational understandings and practices. We have found that the practice of participants in Learning to Learn learning communities:

- derives from changes in thinking;
- is evolutionary in nature; and
- is paradoxical in nature.

### ***Changing practice by changing thinking;***

In Learning to Learn the focus is not on quick changes to practice but rather on a longer term process of educational redesign informed by new understandings about learning and learners. The Core Learning Program, in which teachers and leaders are able to engage with the ideas of leading scholars and practitioners, and the ensuing learning conversations that take place in classrooms, schools and the Learning Circles, are designed to transform the ways students, teachers and leaders think about learning rather than to give them recipes which they can immediately implement in practice. The overall focus for leaders in the Project is on leadership for learning which is sometimes referred to as 'constructivist' leadership' (Lambert, 2000). One leader described herself as 'leading learning' through:

... a facilitative process of engaging staff in thinking and articulating their conceptions about what effective learning was and thinking/reframing their role as a teacher and as a learner. Setting up a culture where teachers were able to talk through issues of teaching and learning; and where teachers wanted to engage in discussions about learning and teaching (Stewards Group Interview).

The Learning Circles similarly were aimed at providing time and space for leaders to have their thinking challenged around issues of leadership and change. An analysis of the Most Significant Change stories revealed that people were changing their worldviews – in regard to themselves as learners and understanding the processes involved in learning. People wrote about the need to understand themselves, their patterns of thinking and response and their preparedness to change habitual patterns. Some wrote about the non-linear process of change and their growing acceptance of ambiguity and uncertainty. The leaders agreed that there needed to be ‘safe’ places for learning where there were opportunities to think aloud and value everyone’s experience. The leaders concluded that they needed to build a culture where ‘we are all learners, risk taking is valued and encouraged, it is okay to make a mistake’ and where ‘a degree of discomfort in our learning actually provides for active learning’. This last point represented a very different view for some of the learning circle participants to that which they had held previously (Le Cornu, 2004).

The leaders in the Stewards Group (involving leaders who had moved to new settings) acknowledged that their involvement in Learning to Learn had changed their thinking about leadership. They explained that it had provided them with a lens and framework for processing issues. This supported them to depersonalise situations and reframe their experiences in ways that helped them to learn more about developing leadership practices in a new setting. One leader put it this way:

It helped because for me I could see some of the patterns. It helped me be more strategic. Definitely helped me sustain some optimism about the process. Helped give some courage to ride out of the discomforts and not to move quickly and fall back into old ways. (Stewards Group Interview).

### ***The evolutionary nature of changing practice***

Because of Learning to Learn’s focus on first transforming thinking, there is not the expectation that sites will come into the Project with clearly defined maps for changing practice. Fullan and Miles (1992) cited ‘faulty maps of change’ as one of the main reasons why so many past attempts to change schools have failed. They maintain that faulty constructs about how change proceeds include viewing it as a day-by-day improvisation, or as the rational planning of objectives and sequential tasks. According to Fullan (1999) ‘change unfolds in non-linear ways’ and should be seen as a ‘journey not a blue-print’. It is this view of change, as a learning journey, that informs schools’ planning in Learning to Learn. School leaders, together with their school communities, face the challenge of using approaches to planning that are emergent rather than prescriptive. According to Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers (1999), for school leaders this means beginning ‘with a strong intention not a set of action plans’ and allowing plans to emerge locally from response to needs and contingencies (p. 9). The starting point for emergent planning is the values clarification and vision development described earlier in the paper.

In Phase 1 Learning Circles, school leaders shared some of the ways they encouraged an emergent approach to redesigning practice through cyclical processes of planning,

trialing and reflecting, a process described by Fullan and Miles (1992) as ‘not the traditional ‘plan, then do,’ but ‘do, then plan ... and do and plan some more’ (p. 749). For instance, in some schools members of the school community trialled small changes in practice and used these as a basis for sharing and reflecting with colleagues about whether or not they did, in fact, contribute to improved teaching and learning. The ‘do and plan’ approach appeared to be particularly potent for teachers as it is grounded in practice. This meant that for some the theories of learning became clear through the dialogue about what had happened in the practice of trialing a new approach.

Well we actually found the most powerful experience we had of all of our whole staff sessions was the day every staff member who tried something got up and explained what they had tried, talked about it, talked about the pitfalls, explained what it was and answered questions. And for everyone, they suddenly thought, ‘Now we know what we're trying to achieve. (Le Cornu et al., 2002).

Many of the conversations in the Learning Circles affirmed the evolving nature of changing practices – whether it be at the classroom or school level. One of the teachers explained the power of the discourse in this process. She acknowledged that she was having to make a conscious effort to practise a ‘new language’ of learning and then she went on to say: ‘If you get to the stage of using the language, you’re halfway there, to changing’ (Le Cornu & Peters, 2004). Meyer (1998, cited in Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999) characterises teacher learning as a dialectic of composing and disrupting – composing a view of self, voice, relationships and curriculum – while at the same time experiencing such elements as productively disruptive to many aspects of school life. This dialectic helps to explain the evolutionary nature of changing practices – as the teachers were engaged and supported in a learning process which required them to rethink and reframe their ideas around learning, changes in their classrooms followed. At a wider level, the leaders were prepared to change structures and conditions in their schools which were seen to be interfering with learning.

### ***The paradoxical nature of practice***

It is generally recognised that addressing paradoxes, dilemmas and constraints is an integral part of learning and change. Groundwater-Smith, Ewing and Le Cornu. (2001) drew attention to the centrality of dilemmas to educators’ work. They described dilemmas as ‘complex situations in which the choices have to be unraveled and the consequences for taking particular paths weighed up’ (p. 13). They argued that teachers need to learn to ‘read the contradictions and find the textual interplay between rhetoric, logic and forms of evidence’ (p. 12). For teachers in Learning to Learn schools there were ongoing dilemmas and challenges as they tried to develop their teaching in line with social constructivist learning theories. Challenges included interpreting constructivist learning theory, balancing knowledge construction and achieving specified learning objectives, trying to make all learning meaningful, determining how much explicit teaching should occur, allocating their time and meeting the expectations of stakeholders (Le Cornu and Peters, 2004)

For the leaders, dilemmas emerged as they tried to implement an evolutionary, holistic and collaborative approach to leadership rather than a ‘managerial’ approach characterised by the practice of ‘strong, directive leadership focussed on curriculum

and instruction from the principal' (Hallinger, 2003, p. 329). Managerial leadership is still the norm in many schools and is the style of leadership practice that is often expected by teachers, students and parents. As leaders in the Project developed leadership styles that were more in the transformational style, they found themselves engaging in practices that were paradoxical in many respects as they tried to balance a range of competing expectations from within and without. This was particularly the case when leaders who had been involved in Learning to Learn moved to new sites. In a study of the leaders who comprised the Stewards' Group we found a number of paradoxical themes permeating their practice as they constructed leadership in new settings. These were:

- leading learning *and* managing the site;
- acknowledging the past *and* initiating new directions;
- building relationships *and* challenging professional identity;
- routine ('surface') decision-making *and* reflective ('deep') decision-making; and
- responding emotionally *and* analytically (Peters & Le Cornu, 2004)

Because these leaders had moved into schools which were not involved in Learning to Learn they no longer had the support of regular Learning Circles to help them to make sense of their experiences and to share their experiences and learning about transition. With the help of Margot Foster, the Project Manager, they formed their own learning community which they named the 'Steward's Group and met regularly over an eighteen month period. This group provided them with much needed opportunities to debrief with trusted colleagues who shared similar constructions of the leadership role and who were facing similar challenges in trying to develop leadership practices in a new setting. As one commented:

The leadership in transition group was absolutely the most positive thing that could have come about I think. Because of that sense of loss in community, the sense of not having a single person who knows of your journey, who you can have conversations with anymore about common understandings. (Stewards Group Interview).

Although the paradoxes identified above were based on a study of Learning to Learn leaders in transition, many similar examples of contradictory expectations and paradoxical practices have arisen in Learning Circles. As was the case for the Steward's Group, Learning Circles have enabled participants to debrief, analyse and reframe their practice. In particular, the focus on sharing challenges, dilemmas and tensions, rather than on simply reporting progress, allows the paradoxical nature of transformational leadership to be surfaced.

All in all, we have found that the participants in Learning to Learn learning communities have made changes to their practices and these changes derive from changes in thinking and are evolutionary and paradoxical in nature. This finding supports Wenger's concept of learning as doing.

### **Identity – learning as becoming**

Wenger's (1998) assertion that learning 'changes who we are by changing our ability to participate, to belong, to negotiate meaning' (p. 227) accords with a key Learning to Learn principle that participation in learning communities challenges and develops learners' identities. In particular we have found that identity development in learning communities occurs when:

- participants' world views are challenged; and
- the emotional demands of learning are addressed.

### ***Developing identity by challenging participants' world views***

There is widespread recognition that teachers' practice is informed by their world views (Reynolds, 1995). Learning to Learn participants come to realise that the key to changing practice is successfully challenging and transforming the assumptions, beliefs, values and understandings that underpin practice. For teachers and leaders this means being prepared to examine critically their 'taken for granted' views and practices in the light of new understandings and discard those that are found to be wanting. Cochran-Smith (2003) stressed that engagement in learning communities involves 'both *learning* new knowledge, questions and practices, and at the same time, *unlearning* some long-held ideas, beliefs and practices, which are often difficult to uproot' (p. 9). Margot Foster, the Learning to Learn Project Manager, explained this process as challenging or reframing the 'professional identity' of participants:

When teachers start investigating their work and researching what they do and seeing new things, you actually give them a new pair of eyes, you reframe their professional identity.

As reported earlier, one of the main paradoxes faced by leaders in the Project was that of finding ways to challenge teachers' professional identities while at the same time maintaining positive relationships. This is not an easy balance to achieve as can be seen in the following comment:

So the difficulty for me was, how do I convince them that I think that they are good teachers who could be even better teachers and have them believe the challenges about moving them on and not pulling them to pieces.  
(Stewards Group Interview)

In Phase 1 Learning Circles leaders shared a range of strategies they used to support teachers in the difficult work of transforming their professional identities. These can be summarised as:

- accepting different levels of engagement and involvement;
- providing opportunities for dissenting voices to be heard;
- using Learning to Learn resources to support teachers' learning; and
- restructuring time to provide more time for professional learning within school hours. (Le Cornu, Peters, Foster & Shin, 2002).

### ***Addressing the emotional demands of learning***

Not surprisingly, challenges to identity can cause those being challenged to feel considerable discomfort, anxiety and self-doubt. Hargreaves (1994) argued that teachers are more prone to these feelings than most because teaching is a profession of 'endless aspiration' (p. 150). Fullan (1997) asserted that additional feelings of

discomfort can come into play when teachers are asked to engage in change, with many experiencing ‘fear of the unknown, ambivalence and anxiety’ to the point where their capacity to be effective reformers is significantly reduced and they suffer burnout (p. 226).

As learning communities developed within their schools, Learning to Learn teachers found themselves increasingly in a culture that helped them to accept and manage the uncertainty associated with change and to cope with their own levels of discomfort. In an in-depth study with four teachers, they all highlighted the role that the Learning to Learn project had played in developing their confidence as indicated by the following comment: ‘You can’t do this unless you are exposed to (new thinking) like we were with the Learning to Learn project...’ (Le Cornu, Peters & Collins, 2003).

It is not only teachers who experience anxiety when faced with challenges to their identities. Many of the Learning to Learn leaders found that transformational leadership is intensely emotional work. Beatty (2000) suggested that a further paradox of leadership exists in the contradiction between the complex emotions it can invoke and the expectation that strong leaders should not show emotions. This proved to be particularly difficult for the leaders in the Stewards’ Group as they tried to co-construct their leadership roles in new settings. They found that they experienced a wide range of both exhilarating and potentially debilitating emotions, but felt enormous pressure to maintain a calm and rational front. While not explicitly dealing with the emotional ramifications of changes to identity, Wenger (1998) acknowledged the struggles that occur when people have to reconcile the competing demands of their different forms of membership in multiple communities of practice (p. 159). Following on from this he suggested that the ‘work of reconciliation may be the most significant challenge faced by learners who move from one community of practice to another’ (p. 160).

The emotional component of school leaders’ work is beginning to receive attention in the literature with acknowledgments that to be effective leaders need ‘to combine practical intelligence, analytical intelligence and emotional intelligence’ (Davies & Davies, 2004, p. 35). Higgs and Dulewicz (2000, cited in Day, Harris, & Hadfield, 2001) found that one of the core elements common to more than a hundred successful leaders was ‘an awareness of their own emotions; an ability to recognize and acknowledge them without being swamped; driven by a degree of self belief’ (p.?). Fortunately, the leaders in Learning to Learn are able to share these emotions with trusted colleagues who are experiencing similar feelings. Through such sharing they are able to sustain their self belief through times of anxiety and stress. One school leader from Phase 1 of Learning to Learn summarised the role of Learning Circles when he said: ‘they have enabled us to manage our anxiety’ (Le Cornu et al., 2002).

Clearly Wenger’s concept of identity – learning as becoming – resonates with the experiences in Learning to Learn learning communities. Participants’ world views were challenged and their emotions were brought to the fore in the difficult work of transforming professional identities.

### **Beyond communities of practice: Learning circles for transformational leadership**

It can be seen that Wenger's (1998) theories about learning through communities of practice have some application to the conceptualisation and practices of learning communities in Learning to Learn. In particular, applying his key concepts of community, meaning, practice and identity has provided us with a way of synthesising some of the key insights gained from our work with participants over the past five years. In the first section of this paper we have explored areas of resonance between Wenger's theories and the learning communities in Learning Circles and schools. However, in this final section we turn our attention to Learning Circles only as we believe that they have some significant differences from the naturally evolving communities of practice described by Wenger. We would argue that these differences are important and that communities of practice are not sufficient to meet all the learning needs of transformational leaders.

The first significant difference is that Learning Circles are ordained and structured rather than evolutionary. We believe that this is an important characteristic in that it ensures that the leaders of the sites who are accepted into the Project are provided with the time and opportunity to interact with fellow leaders and critical friends from the Project team and tertiary sector around the shared interests of transformational leadership and educational redesign. Such opportunities are unlikely to be found in the multiple personal and professional communities of practice to which leaders may belong (Wenger, 1998). For instance, although leaders may be members of communities of practice involving at least some members of their school communities, such groups do not necessarily have a shared focus on leadership. Even in communities of practice involving other educational leaders, through system structures such as District Meetings, there is not necessarily a shared agenda around educational redesign. Finally, the 'occupational norms of privacy' (Grossman et al., 2001, p. 942) that still exist in many schools may make the development of any sense of community difficult to achieve, at least in the early stages of involvement in Learning to Learn. For these reasons, we suggest that it is essential that Learning to Learn leaders have access to the additional opportunities for intellectual challenge and emotional support that exist within the more formalised structures of Learning Circles.

A second important difference is that Learning Circles are facilitated rather than self managed. As university colleagues, our role is to work with members of the Learning to Learn management team to develop and implement Learning Circle content and processes that are responsive to the interests and needs identified by participants. As part of this role we introduce relevant insights from current literature and research and develop and model processes that members can adapt for use in their schools. We also take on the role of 'critical friend' by bringing our perspectives and questions as 'outsiders' to the learning conversations. McLaughlin (1997) espoused the value of learning communities forming such connections with agents from other organisations who can provide 'an outside reality check, critical feedback and coaching' (p. 86).

Another significant difference is that in the Learning Circles there is a deliberate focus on developing the norms and relationships that maximise participation, collaboration and learning. Although communities of practice are formed by the relationships and interactions of a particular group of people, understanding and developing these relationships is not a specific focus of their communal activity.

Learning Circles are based on the premise that social interactions can be enhanced if participants develop their awareness of their own and others' interpersonal and intrapersonal skills and needs. Through paying deliberate attention to the development of explicit norms and identifying the characteristics of effective learning relationships, leaders are able to develop new insights and strategies which they can apply to facilitating learning relationships in their own workplaces.

A further important difference is that Learning Circles have an explicit focus on optimising opportunities for learning, whereas in communities of practice learning is a natural byproduct of sustained engagement by the members (Wenger, 1998, p. 86). The primary purpose of Learning Circles is to share and develop individual and collective understandings of transformational leadership and educational redesign. They provide an opportunity for members to share and develop their understandings through participation in carefully structured and facilitated learning conversations and the development of specific learning processes such as critical questioning, surfacing assumptions and reframing perceptions. Feiman-Nemser (2001) argued that it is assuming a 'critical stance and commitment to inquiry' that distinguishes learning communities from other groups where educators share ideas and offer encouragement (p. 1043). Through such inquiry processes members of Learning Circles develop new insights to inform their practice within their schools and policy at the system level.

A final difference is that in Learning Circles attention is paid to the personal and emotional implications of transformational leadership. In keeping with Learning to Learn's focus on changing practice through changing the practitioner, Learning Circles provide a forum for each leader to share and analyse the tensions, dilemmas, challenges and paradoxes that are an ongoing part of constructing transformational leadership. In this way they provide a vehicle in which participants can engage in the important work of 'reconciling identities' (Wenger, 1998) with others engaged in similar reconciliation processes.

In closing, Wenger's (1998) theories about learning in communities of practice have contributed significantly to our understandings of participants' experiences and learning in the learning communities developed in Learning to Learn schools and the Learning Circles. In particular, we have been able to use his frames of community, meaning, practice and identity to focus on key insights arising from our work in Learning to Learn over the past five years. However, it is also clear that leaders who aspire to be transformational have needs that are unlikely to be met within the naturally occurring communities of practice of which they are members. For this reason, they need access to learning communities which are designed specifically to meet their needs. Learning Circles appear to provide transformational leaders with communities in which they can engage in co-construction of knowledge about leading the redesign process and manage the emotional dimensions of the change process.

## **References**

- Beatty, B. B. (2000). *Pursuing the paradox of emotion and educational leadership*. Paper presented at the APAPDC National Online Conference, Online.
- Bruner, J. (1996) *The Culture of Education*. London: Harvard University Press.
- Cochran-Smith, M. (2003). Learning and Unlearning: the education of teacher educators. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 19, 5-28.

- Cochran-Smith, M. & Lytle, S. (1999) Relationships of Knowledge and Practice: Teacher Learning in Communities. In A. Iran-Nejad & C. D. Pearson (Eds) *Review of Research in Education* (vol. 24, pp. 249-305). Washington: American Educational Research Association.
- Collay, M., Dunlap, D., Enloe, W. & Gagnon Jr., G.W. (1998). *Learning Circles: Creating Conditions for Professional Development*. Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press.
- Davies, R. (1996). *An Evolutionary Approach to Facilitating Organisational Learning: An Experiment by the Christian Commission for Development in Bangladesh*. Swansea: Centre for Development Studies, Swansea. <http://www.mande.co.uk/docs/ccdb.htm>.
- Davies, B. J., & Davies, B. (2004). Strategic leadership. *School Leadership & Management*, 24(1), 29-38.
- Day, C., Harris, A., & Hadfield, M. (2001). Challenging the orthodoxy of effective school leadership. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 4(1), 39.
- Day, C., Harris, A., Hadfield, M., Tolley, H., & Beresford, J. (2000). *Leading schools in times of change*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Dugage, M. R. (2002). *Web-Enabled Communities of Practice: A New Approach to Effective Marketing*.
- Feiman-Nemser, S. (2001). From Preparation to Practice: Designing a Continuum to Strengthen and Sustain Teaching. *Teachers College Record*, 103(6), 1013-1056.
- Feldman, A. (1999). The Role of Conversation in Collaborative Action Research. *Educational Action Research*, 7 (1), 125-144.
- Fullan, M. (1999). *Change Forces: The Sequel*. London: Falmer Press.
- Fullan, M. (1997). Emotion and Hope: Constructive Concepts for Complex Times. In A. Hargreaves (Ed) *ASCD Yearbook: Rethinking Educational Change with Heart and Mind* (pp. 216-233). Virginia: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Fullan, M. and Miles, M. (1992). Getting Reform Right: What Works and What Doesn't. *Phi Delta Kappan*, June, 745 - 752.
- Grossman, P., Wineburg, S., & Woolworth, S. (2001). Toward a Theory of Community. *Teachers College Record*, 103 (6), 942-1012.
- Groundwater-Smith, S., Ewing, R. & Le Cornu, R. (2001). *Teaching Challenges and Dilemmas*. Southbank: Nelson Thomson Learning.
- Hallinger, P. (2003). Leading Educational Change: reflections on the practice of instructional and transformational leadership. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 33(3), 329.
- Hargreaves, A. (1994). *Changing Teachers, Changing Times: Teachers' Work and Culture in the Postmodern Age*. London: Cassell.
- Lambert, L. (2000). *Building leadership capacity in schools*. Paper presented at the South Australian Centre for Leadership in Education, Adelaide.
- Le Cornu, R. (2004). *Learning Circles: Providing spaces for renewal of both teachers and teacher educators*. Paper presented to the Australian Teacher Education Association Conference, Bathurst, July.
- Le Cornu, R. & Peters, J. (2004). *Managing the Challenges and Dilemmas of 'Constructivism in Practice'*. Paper presented to the Australian Association for Research in Education Conference, Brisbane, Dec.
- Le Cornu R., Peters J. and Collins J. (2003) *What are the characteristics of constructivist learning cultures?* Paper presented to the British Educational Research Association Conference, Edinburgh, September.
- Le Cornu, R., Peters, J., Foster, M., Barratt, R. & Mellowship, D. (2003). *Exploring Perceptions of Significant Change*. Paper presented to NZARE/AARE Joint Conference, Auckland, December.
- Le Cornu, R., Peters, J., Foster, M. & Shin, A. (2002). *Leadership for School Improvement*. Paper presented to the British Educational Research Association Conference, Exeter, September.
- Lieberman, A. (2000). Networks as learning communities: Shaping the future of teacher development. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 51(3), 221-227.

- Mclaughlin, M. (1997). Rebuilding teacher professionalism in the United States. In A. Hargreaves & R. Evans (Eds) *Beyond Educational Reform: Bringing teachers back in*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Moos, L. (2003). Educational leadership: leadership for/as Bildung? *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 6 (1), 19.
- Peters, J. & Le Cornu, R. (2004). *Leaders in Transition: living with Paradoxes*. Paper presented to the British Educational Research Association Conference, Manchester, September.
- Peters, J., Le Cornu R. and Collins, J. (2003). *Constructing Classroom Learning Relationships*. Paper presented to the Australian Association for Research in Education Conference, Auckland, Dec.
- Peters, J., Dobbins, R., & Johnson, B. (1996). *Restructuring and organisational culture* (4). Sydney: National Schools Network.
- Retallick, J. A. (1997). Workplace Learning and the School as a Learning Organisation. In R. J. King, D. M. Hill & J. A. Retallick (Eds), *Exploring Professional Development in Education* (pp. 21-40). Wentworth Falls: Social Science Press.
- Reynolds, R. J. (1995). The Professional Self-Esteem of Teacher Educators. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 46 (3), 216-227.
- Schrage, M. (1990). *Shared Minds, The New Technologies of Collaboration*. New York: Random House.
- Smyth, J. (1991). *Teachers as Collaborative Learners*. Philadelphia: Open University Press.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of Practice*. University of Cambridge: Press Syndicate.
- Wheatley, Margaret J. and Kellner-Rogers, M. (1999). *The Irresistible Future of Organizing*. A document provided as an educational resource for a training program by the Dalmau Network Group.