

# Inside Teacher Community: Representations of Classroom Practice

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*Researchers posit that conditions for improving teaching and learning are strengthened when teachers collectively question ineffective teaching routines, examine new conceptions of teaching and learning, find generative means to acknowledge and respond to difference and conflict, and engage actively in supporting one another's professional growth. Yet relatively little research examines the specific interactions and dynamics by which professional community constitutes a resource for teacher learning and innovations in teaching practice. In particular, few studies go "inside teacher community" to focus closely on the teacher development opportunities and possibilities that reside within ordinary daily work. This paper draws on intensive case studies of teacher knowledge, practice, and learning among teachers of mathematics and English in two high schools to take up the problem of how classroom teaching practice comes to be known, shared, and developed among teachers through their out-of-classroom interactions.*

For more than two decades, scholars have pursued interests in teachers' professional relationships and their significance for teacher development, teachers' careers and commitments, and school reform. In this paper, I continue a set of investigations into professional community as a locus for teachers' work and teacher development.<sup>1</sup> More specifically, I take up the problem of how classroom teaching practice comes to be known, shared, and developed among teachers through their out-of-classroom interactions.

This analysis responds to steadily expanding claims that professional community constitutes an important contributor to teacher development, the collective capacity of schools, and improvements in the practices of teaching and schooling. These claims amount to a certain optimistic premise (see Figure 1). Researchers posit that conditions for improving teaching and learning are strengthened when teachers collectively question ineffective teaching routines, examine new conceptions of teaching and learning, find generative means to acknowledge and respond to difference and conflict, and engage actively in supporting one another's professional growth (Achinstein, 2002; Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001;

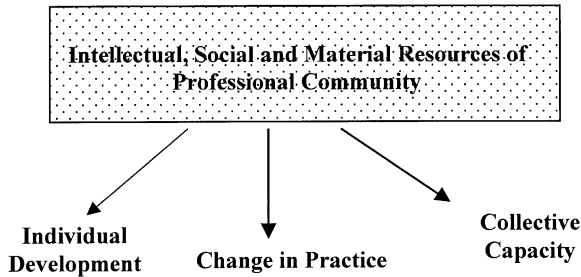


Figure 1. The optimistic premise of professional community.

Gutierrez, 1996; King & Newmann, 1999; Little, 1990, 1999; Louis & Kruse, 1995; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Stokes, 2001; Talbert, 1995; Westheimer, 1998; Witziers, Slegers, & Imants, 1999). Taken together, this body of work marks considerable progress in the conceptualization and measurement of collegial interaction, and in specifying the attributes of professional communities.

Yet relatively little research examines the specific interactions and dynamics by which professional community constitutes a resource for teacher learning and innovations in teaching practice (Wilson & Berne, 1999). In particular, few studies focus closely on the teacher development opportunities and possibilities that reside within ordinary daily work. DiPardo's (1999) detailed ethnographic portraits of four teacher collaborations suggest that sorting out teachers' learning opportunities and trajectories in the course of their everyday work in schools will be a complicated undertaking (see also Aguirre, 2002; Horn, 2002; Little, 2002; Stokes, 2001; Willman, 2001). Nonetheless, if the professional community operates to enable and create teacher learning, it ought to be evident in the ongoing encounters that teachers have with one another.

In a paper published in 1987, I speculated about what resources teachers might supply one another as colleagues, and how time spent together might plausibly translate into benefit to students:

Is it that lesson planning improves as people press each other to say not only *what* they do with students, but *why*? Is it that the toughest, most persistent problems of curriculum, instruction, and classroom management get the benefit of the group's experience? Is it the combined sense of confidence and obligation that teachers carry into the classroom? Is it the peer pressure to live up to agreements made and ideas offered? Is it that in making teaching principles and practices more public, the best practices are promoted more widely

and the weakest ones are abandoned? Is it simply that close work with colleagues affords a kind of stimulation and solidarity that reflects itself in energetic classroom performance and holds talented teachers longer in the profession? (Little, 1987, p. 494)

At the time, I was speculating about a black box—a set of plausible but unexplored and unspecified relationships. Elsewhere at about the same time, I argued for investigations that would map the configuration and boundaries of teachers' professional ties within and beyond schools ("meaningful reference groups") and would examine the content of collegial interchange. Regarding the latter, I sought "a more close-grained account of the moral and intellectual dispositions that teachers bring to or develop in the course of their relations with one another" that would be informed by "careful scrutiny of the actual talk among teachers" (Little, 1990, p. 524).

More than a decade later, this particular black box still remains largely to be opened, placing some serious limitations on the optimistic premise. Thus, I want to delve more fully into the questions of what constitutes the intellectual, social, and material resources of professional community. Among these resources, I am particularly interested in what is afforded—or not—by accounts of classroom events, circumstances, relations, possibilities, and dilemmas that teachers put forward in work that transpires largely outside the classroom as part of naturally occurring workplace interaction.

I am drawing primarily on intensive case studies of teacher knowledge, practice, and learning among teachers of mathematics and English in two high schools. My focus is on teacher groups that (1) have some clear collective identity (the teachers describe and name themselves in collective terms, sometimes in relation to a formal unit, such as a department and sometimes with respect to more informal affiliations such as the "Algebra Group" or "Academic Literacy Group") and (2) profess a clear task orientation (the teachers see themselves as engaged in improvement-oriented professional work together). That is, this design is not organized to inquire into other kinds of informal groupings that may have personal or organizational significance but are formed around interests ancillary to teaching tasks (the "smokers") nor does it take into account routine exchanges in the informal settings of the school workplace, including staff room talk of the sort that Hammersley (1984), Woods (1984), or Ben-Peretz and Schonmann (2000) have analyzed. Rather, the study takes up the question of what teacher learning opportunities and dynamics of professional practice are evident in teacher-led groups that consider themselves collaborative and innovative.<sup>2</sup> Our three-person research team employed a range of conventional data sources and methods—observation, interviews, pen-and-paper instruments, and school documents—but the most central

of these data, for this analysis, are the audio- and videotaped records of situated interaction among teachers.

#### USEFUL PRECEDENTS IN THE INVESTIGATION OF TEACHER COMMUNITY

Certain useful precedents are particularly evident in the analysis I am developing. By useful precedents I mean those theoretical frames and empirical bodies of work that I believe offer a foundation for emerging investigations of teachers' situated workplace practices. Evolving conceptions of occupational community and communities of practice offer a broad conceptual frame and set of organizing problems.

Consistent with this broad frame are two bodies of empirical research—studies of workplace practices in diverse fields and studies of teacher discourse in the context of formal professional development activity—that suggest ways of parsing the practice of teacher community and establishing its relationship to outcomes of interest. Finally, the heuristic notion of “affordances,” joined to traditions of discourse analysis, supplies an analytic device for specifying the nature of teachers' collective practice and tracing trajectories of learning and change.

#### CONCEPTIONS OF OCCUPATIONAL COMMUNITY AND WORKPLACE COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

I have framed this analysis most directly in relation to the sociological conception of occupational community, with its emphasis on work practices, identities, social relations, and socialization processes (Van Maanen & Barley, 1984), and the related but broader community of practice literature, with its orientation toward persons' mutual engagement in practice, the centrality of participation and its resources, and the notion of trajectories of learning (Lave, 1996; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). This framing permits a close focus on the nature of collective professional practice without falling prey to any assumptions about its virtues. Just as Popkewitz (1991) questions the premise of progress so routinely associated with discussions of reform, I question the premise of improvement in teaching knowledge, practice, and commitments associated with participation in professional communities. On this point, Wenger (1998) cautions:

Because the term “community” is usually a very positive one, I cannot emphasize enough that these interrelations [of mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire] arise out of engagement in practice and not out of an idealized view of what a community should

be like. (pp. 76–77; see also Gusfield, 1975; Talbert, 1995; Westheimer, 1998)

If we are to theorize about the significance of professional community, or make claims regarding its benefits, we must be able to demonstrate how communities achieve their effects. This will require examining the specific interactions and dynamics by which professional communities constitute a resource for teacher learning and the formation of teaching practice.

#### EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATIONS OF WORKPLACE PRACTICE

Concepts emerging from studies of workplace practice in fields outside education, together with the research methods employed in these studies, provide a rich and underused resource for the study of teachers' workplace practice and professional community. Researchers have exploited advances in video and audio technology to uncover the practices by which people at work learn, construct, coordinate, and transform their practice (Barley & Orr, 1997; Drew & Heritage, 1992; Engestrom & Middleton, 1998; Hindmarsh & Heath, 1998; Middleton, 1998; Orr, 1996; Schegloff, 1992). Three examples serve to illustrate the potential utility of these studies for investigations of teacher community.

##### *Access to Practice and the "Horizon of Observation"*

One issue in understanding the nature and significance of communities of practice is how the practice comes to be known, shared, and changed through participation (Wenger, 1998). In their volume on situated learning, Lave and Wenger (1991) introduced the idea of "legitimate peripheral participation" to account for learning in communities of practice. The cases of apprenticeship briefly summarized in that volume suggested how participation might be quite differently organized to create or limit opportunities for learning and competent membership. In his studies of novice marine navigators, Hutchins (1996, p. 52) employs the term "horizon of observation" to define the extent to which elements of a work environment are available as a learning context. This horizon of observation structures how completely novices or newcomers are able to see, hear, and participate in the work in question: its central tasks, tools and instruments, relevant categories and terms, and lines of communication. As in the cases of apprenticeship summarized by Lave and Wenger (1991), these horizons vary in the degree to which they create broad or narrow opportunities for observing others, their interactions, and their tools. Of

interest in studies of teaching and teacher community is the relative insularity of the classroom—its restricted horizon of observation.

### *Transparency of Practice or “Publicly Available Features”*

More specifically, then, one might wonder about what specific aspects of work come to be visible through teachers’ participation with one another and with what fullness and specificity—what I have elsewhere termed the “face” and “transparency” of practice (Little, 2002). In their transcript records of veterinary surgeons working together, Pinch, Collins, and Carbone (1997) show how assessments of a task’s difficulty become a “publicly available feature of skill.” Through their analysis of one feature of practice—the difficulty of specific tasks—the researchers introduce the more general concept of publicly available features of practice. This notion of publicly available features might profitably be applied and extended in studies of teachers’ communities of practice. That is, Pinch et al. focus on issues of a task’s difficulty; they anticipate but do not actually investigate possible distinctions between what is difficult to learn and what is difficult to do. Other aspects of work practice might also be more or less publicly available, including the socioemotional aspects of classroom life, the centrality or importance of certain tasks, or the consequences attached to doing something well, poorly, or not at all.

### *Categories and Classifications*

A related body of research, not limited to workplace studies, focuses attention on the system of categories and classifications by which members of a community organize and communicate practice. Writing about “classification and its consequences,” Bowker and Star (1999) employ examples as disparate as the history of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD), race classification in apartheid South Africa, trajectories of tuberculosis treatment, and shifts in the nature and codification of nurses’ work to show how the creation and maintenance of classificatory schemes constitute fundamental kinds of social practice. Classification schemes operate in part to render the ambiguities of the world as if they possessed the “clarity of social facts” (Mehan, 1996, p. 243). Because they are inevitably (and continuously) historical, political, moral, and cultural constructions and because they tend to form a taken-for-granted, invisible infrastructure of working practice, classifications supply both resources for and impediments to learning and change.<sup>3</sup> In one analysis of data from our current study, Horn (2001) shows how routine ways of classifying students

are taken up differently by the mathematics teachers in two high schools as they justify curricular decisions and explain students' difficulties or failures in mathematics; the result is to create quite different opportunities to examine and problematize practices of mathematics teaching and learning.

#### STUDIES OF TEACHER INTERACTION IN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITY

The most well-developed body of research on situated interactions among teachers has emerged from studies of teachers engaged in formal occasions of professional development. The occasions and groups that form the context for these studies differ from those of our own study in certain significant ways: They have typically been designed and led by university researchers or professional development experts rather than being naturally occurring activities of teachers' work; the occasions entail a more explicit, formal, and sustained focus on teacher learning; they reserve time and space for purposes of professional development; and the teacher participants may come together for professional development while not working together on a daily basis in the same school. Among the specialized programs of professional development that have yielded this promising body of research are programs grounded in teachers' investigation of children's mathematics learning (Fennema et al., 1996; Franke, Carpenter, Fennema, Ansell, & Behrend, 1998; Stein, Silver, & Smith, 1998.); a "book club" of high school English and social studies teachers in which teachers grappled with the nature of text and text interpretation in English and history (Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001); networks of teachers focused on the study of literacy practices (Florio-Ruane & Raphael, 2001; Greenleaf & Schoenbach, 2001; Lieberman & Wood, 2001) or teaching and learning practices in other disciplines (Brandes & Seixas, 1996; Pfeiffer & Featherstone, 1996; Rosebery & Warren, 1998; Seixas, 1993); teachers' deliberations on problems of student assessment (Gearhart & Wolf, 1994; Wilson, 1994); and a range of other teacher study groups (e.g., Clark, 2001).

Despite differences in research context, this line of investigation provides an important source of issues and guidance for investigations of teacher development in everyday work in schools. Methodologically, these studies underscore the challenges in specifying the resources of professional community and teacher learning in the ordinary, mundane interactions of teachers at work together. Substantively, these studies point to the difficulty that teachers encounter in achieving sustained and deep consideration of teaching problems and possibilities, even in conditions formally structured

for that purpose, and to related difficulties in contending with difference and disagreement on matters of practice. However, the few available longitudinal studies document participants' shifts over time in the focus and depth of conversation and in a group's capacity for airing, acknowledging, and responding to differences and conflicts. Such studies have implications for studies of ongoing teacher work groups, calling attention to the composition and stability of the group over time, to the enacted conception of the work in which it is engaged, and to the role played by various participation structures and norms in creating and sustaining explicit attention to problems of practice. In what ways do all of these features permit teachers to make visible their understanding and practices of classroom teaching and to learn, interrupt, problematize or reinvent those practices?

#### HEURISTIC NOTION OF "AFFORDANCE"

Finally, to locate and specify the resources of professional community, I have borrowed the notion of "affordance," which has its origins in studies of animal perception (Gibson, 1977) and is consistent with organizing concepts in ecological psychology and in sociocultural analyses of cognition (see Greeno, 1998).<sup>4</sup> For my purposes, which focus on the construction of professional practice, identity, and relationship, the heuristic notion of affordance calls attention to the multiple possibilities made available in and through talk, gestures and material artifacts. Used as a frame for fine-grained discourse analysis, it helps specify and locate the available resources for learning while acknowledging the inherent ambiguity, open-endedness, and indeterminacy of social practice and learning (Mehan, 1996; also Little, 2002; Wenger, 1998). As I use it here, the term affordance also owes a debt to Stokes's (2001) strategy of describing selected professional development activities in terms of what each enables and does not enable by way of teachers' collective inquiry into practice.

In examining these records of teacher interaction, I translate the notion of affordances into two broad questions:

- *What facets of classroom practice are made visible in out-of-classroom talk and with what degree of transparency?* By the facets or "face" of practice, I mean those categories and aspects of practice that are made available for consideration in the topics taken up in conversation and through any material artifacts that teachers bring with them, create in the moment, or otherwise have available. By transparency, I mean the degree of specificity, completeness, depth, and nuance of practice apparent in the talk and the associated artifacts.



- *How does interaction open up or close down teachers' opportunity to learn?* Embedded in this second question, and its image of "opening up" and "closing down" are two organizing problems or concerns. One is for the orientation toward classroom practice and collegial practice conveyed by teachers' interactions, and specifically for how the teachers orient to problems of "improvement." The second organizing concern centers on the structures and processes of participation, specifically on whether and how teachers are enabled or constrained in taking up the problems and possibilities of classroom practice.

### REPRESENTATIONS OF CLASSROOM PRACTICE IN OUT-OF-CLASSROOM TALK

Using those organizing questions or problems as entry points, I turn now to the data to examine three selected occasions on which portrayals of classroom practice come up in the routine out-of-classroom interaction of ongoing teacher work groups. That is, these are occasions in which talk about classroom practice and relationships surface as part of the talk in and of the collaborative work of the teacher group. Although the instances that follow do not exhaust the ways that representations of classroom practice are made manifest in our data, they do serve to demonstrate characteristic possibilities and tensions associated with teacher learning in and from workplace collaboration. My view is that these occasions, taken together, greatly complicate the expectations we might have about what makes a teacher learning community and about how emerging teacher communities might fulfill the optimistic premise associated with them.

#### #1: ENGLISH DEPARTMENT MEETING—PORTRAYING STUDENTS' PROBLEMS AS PROBLEMS OF TEACHING

Members of the English Department at East High School have repeatedly mentioned in passing to one another that their students have difficulty with various aspects of writing and specifically with conventions of grammar. As the school year begins in Fall 1999, they propose to devote part of their regularly scheduled department meeting times to talking about this problem. At the first monthly department meeting on September 20, two teachers (Miyuki and Lynne) have taken the lead in organizing a discussion of how students respond (or not) to teachers' feedback on their writing. They have written a prompt on the board in the classroom where they are meeting, inviting the other teachers to write their responses underneath. The resulting display is reproduced in Figure 2 with the prompt in italics and teachers' responses below.

*When I make comments on my students' papers, my goal is . . .*

- to reinforce their strengths and draw attention to major weaknesses (usually one or two).
- to try to let them know that they did something right/well; let them know what to do differently next time (sometimes scold, I will admit).
- to be clear and specific and to improve drafts or future writing. To explain *why*.
- to encourage students and at the same time give them focus on how to make the most of their words.
- to let them know that I actually do read their papers.
- to be clear and encouraging while at the same time pointing out what needs work.
- to be clear and thoughtful and suggest improvements in a forceful way

Figure 2. Teachers' written accounts of goals for student feedback.

In constructing the prompt in this way, Miyuki and Lynne convey certain assumptions about the participants' practice as English teachers (i.e., that teachers do make comments on student papers, and that they have goals in doing so). In crafting their responses, the teachers construct an artifact (albeit a transient one, erased when the meeting ends) that accords with those assumptions, one that positions each of them publicly in relationship to instructional goals. Miyuki observes that it "looks like everyone is sort of in some way on the same page as far as what our goals are." She continues in a vein that portrays this as a conversation about departmental consistency or uniformity in practice, and is subsequently echoed by the department chair (Patrick):

MIYUKI: So what I wanted us to see, what we're sort of on the same page about. And then try to see um, what we actually do when we get a paper in our hands, I guess. Our goal is to try to come up with some norms about how common <?> department on paper and so there can be some consistencies. Not that we have to follow the exact same phrase every time, but some consistencies in terms of our understanding what our goals are and trying to help these students.

PATRICK: We said before that we were really interested in trying to come up with regular comments, both discussing comments that work and didn't work, comments that caused change, in sharing those. We are also interested in coming up with comments they [students] would <see> from the time they entered this school until the time they left.

However, others' comments suggest that their interest in this conversation may be driven less by a shared commitment to departmental consistency than by an interest in expanding individual instructional options:

UNIDENTIFIED: I'm also- <like> to [know?] what other people say because I find myself getting in a rut of running "Good!". Good, it was like a little vocabulary of comments. Yeah, I'd love to expand my glossary.

CARLENE: ...I did this <?> paragraphs this weekend and half of them start out with "good" and the other half start out with "not bad." I just realized...I went "Oh God, okay, that needs to be more creative."

In effect, the group's discussion has now been framed by two different purposes that are potentially in tension—consistency or uniformity on the one hand and individual "creativity" or repertoire on the other. It is at this point that Lynne enters the conversation in a way that further complicates the group's focus and broadens the purposes the teachers might have in discussing their written feedback to students:

LYNNE: Well Patrick, Patrick I'd like to speak on this topic as well and what I did in somewhat of a hurry was to copy a couple of pages in two different students' papers.... One is a paper I thought that was an above average interpretive in-class essay. And I just copied two pages of it. Above average in its thought format and its structure but too much summary, which is often the problem for me when teaching interpretive essays. They just summarize the quote. And then I copied an excellent couple of pages of an eleventh grade AP essay just to—same thought, it was a good example of interpretive writing at its best at this level. So what I actually—Patrick [department chair] had asked me to talk about—or had asked us to talk about how to norm the comments that we make.

And I thought of something over the weekend that I thought is actually important to talk about before we even talk about the comments we make because I have a really hard time *teaching* interpretive essay, getting them to look different. And so I wanted to share these few thoughts ... on some sort of revelations I had about getting them to interpret.

She continues:

One of the things that I realized that I think we were talking about at our 10th grade meeting too is that when they are—there's a

difference between showing quotes and telling quotes, just like there is a difference between telling statements—“She is really pretty”—and showing statements—“Her eyes are (.) whatever.” ... But what we do want them to do is quote passages that show, through imagery, new language, something that needs to be interpreted. And something relating to you know making a connection between an image and a character’s conflict or discussing the motivation for a character’s action....

So the reason for my talk about this is that I realized that the comments that I write that are probably the most problematic both for me and the kids are things like “push” or “deeper” or “so what?” and maybe a few others. And I write this all the time because they are always so shallow in their commentary either summarizing what the quote already says and they say “Well, I can already see that. I’ve already read the story. You don’t need to tell me that.” Or, just not being effective, not being very deep. So I’m constantly writing things like this and what I realized was if I could get them to understand the difference between a showing quote and a telling quote, I probably don’t even have to write so many of these comments.

Without purporting to analyze this excerpt fully here, I point to a few of its distinguishing features. Lynne supplies the group with actual samples of student work from her classes, one of which exemplifies a problem in student performance. She identifies the problem as a recurrent one (and thus presumably worthy of attention) and interprets the shortcomings of student performance as a recurrent problem of teaching: “often the problem for me when teaching interpretive essays.” Adding that “I have a really hard time *teaching* interpretive essay,” Lynne (a) speculates about a reason that her students may continue to have difficulty—they don’t understand what is called for in demonstrating the basis for an interpretation (“showing”); (b) concludes that her written feedback is inadequate to help students recognize or remedy the problem; and, in effect, (c) argues that discussing “how to norm the comments that we make” may not go far enough to remedy students’ writing difficulties, especially if that discussion is decoupled from a discussion of what students find difficult (“if I could get them to understand the difference between a showing quote and a telling quote”). Throughout, Lynne operates on the premise that the teachers share a certain language for talking about teaching writing (e.g., a distinction between “telling” and “showing”). She also acts as if disclosing problems of practice and reasoning publicly about those problems are expected features of departmental practice; similarly, she acts as if the group’s ordinary practice permits teachers other than the department chair to take initiative in opening up discussions of classroom practice.

In several respects, this is an instance that could be thought to embody the “optimistic premise” of teacher learning community. A group of teachers reserves time to engage in mutual problem-solving; a teacher discloses a problem of teaching practice and publicly accepts responsibility for helping students by revising her instruction; and evidence of student learning is on the table for the group’s consideration. At the same time, the glimpse of Lynne’s classroom is necessarily limited—two samples of student work chosen “in somewhat of a hurry” are handed out as Lynne is talking, with no provision for more than a cursory skim by the teachers present. Lynne’s verbal account of her own usual feedback to students and that of others (“‘push’ or ‘deeper’ ‘so what?’ ‘good’ ‘not bad’”) suggests that it may not be uniformly as encouraging nor as specific as one might anticipate from the list generated on the board, but neither Lynne nor any of the others calls attention to the teacher feedback actually written on the two writing samples.

In the 30 minutes or so reserved for this discussion in a 90-minute department meeting,<sup>5</sup> teachers carve out an opportunity for concentrated attention to issues and practices of classroom teaching, but its affordances prove complicated to unpack. The portrayals of classroom dilemmas and performances go well beyond a quick anecdote to include samples of student work and some detailed exegesis of the problem of teaching and learning the interpretive essay. Yet this representation of teaching, the face of teaching it makes visible, is both fleeting and incomplete, insufficient to grasp fully what Lynne’s own practice encompasses in “teaching interpretive essay” or “making comments” on student papers.

As a display of the group’s own collective practice as the “English Department”—the way its members elicit and treat accounts of classroom life—this episode is also both revealing and ambiguous. The teachers have publicly agreed they want to devote blocks of meeting time to the problems of teaching writing, but the dynamics of this episode suggest they may have no established practice for doing so. They do, however, have established routines and norms by which individual teachers take leadership at each grade level in designing and presenting curriculum ideas for the use of the group. They also have established agreements about the coordination of curriculum at each grade level (agreements about consistency). It may be these collective precedents for leadership in curriculum development or coordination of curriculum content that Miyuki relies on when she structures an activity that focuses the conversation on consistency or “norming” of teachers’ feedback on writing, and that Lynne embodies when she makes her move to re-focus the discussion on teaching the interpretive essay. No one challenges Lynne’s move at the time. Indeed, the teachers engage avidly in the discussion that follows Lynne’s “revelation” and are still deep in

conversation at 5:00, when their meeting typically ends. The department chair then intercedes, saying:

PATRICK: Can I ask a process question? It's 5:00. What do you guys want to do? This is such a valuable discussion. ...Can we, I just found what you guys did really helpful. And I think maybe if we all came with our thoughts about the effective ways to teach and comments that we're using that we might be able to do the same thing with a broader  $\ll ? \gg$  in another words. Um, can we plan to do that?

However, there is some evidence that Lynne's shift from a conversation about consistency of the teachers' feedback practice to a conversation about its effectiveness was not entirely unproblematic. As Lynne acknowledges, the department chair had established the original charge ("Patrick had asked me to talk about- or had asked us to talk about how to norm the comments that we make."). At 5:00 p.m., when Patrick subsequently turns the group's attention to plans for a follow-up discussion, he credits this discussion with having been "valuable" and "helpful," but adds, "I also want to come back to the idea of us norming." Lynne promptly apologizes for taking the conversation in another direction, but a colleague counters, "No, that was brilliant." Another teacher concurs: "Maybe we can't have a norming discussion until we've dwelled a little bit deeper...into how we communicate interpretive writing."

In this first department meeting of the year, then, members of the group display a disposition both to coordinate certain instructional practices (issues of consistency) and to engage in reflection or inquiry regarding their practice (issues of worth or effectiveness). Further, and crucially, these twin dispositions are shown to coexist in a certain tension. To coordinate practice, in this case by aiming for consistency in teachers' feedback on student writing, is to embrace a collective responsibility for instruction but also to grant selected practices the imprimatur of certainty. To question practice is to delay agreements on more uniform practice, while making issues of purpose, worth, and effectiveness available as matters of collective concern. Representations of classroom practice surface in ways that advance both of these interests, while also showing how those interests are coconstructed, negotiated, and reconciled through participation in the group's routine work together.

#### #2: THE ALGEBRA GROUP'S "CHECK-IN" ROUTINE AND AN INTERN'S TEACHING PROBLEM

A day later, in a classroom nearby, the Algebra Group is holding its weekly meeting. These mathematics teachers have committed collectively to

increasing students' access to and achievement in college preparatory mathematics, and they have succeeded in doing so (students in this working class high school enroll in and pass college preparatory mathematics courses at a substantially higher rate than students in comparable schools). Their classes are a heterogeneous mix of students, including both those who have succeeded with mathematics and those who have accumulated a record of struggle and failure. The teachers also share certain values and ideas about curriculum and pedagogy, including the use of small problem-solving groups and a curriculum built around what they term "group-worthy problems." On this occasion, they have devoted slightly more than an hour to discussing various mathematics problems, how they have approached teaching them, and how their students have responded. Having completed that work, they turn to the routine the group calls "check-in," in which each participant takes a turn to report how things are going in the classroom or to raise an issue or problem related to teaching and learning.

As each of the teachers takes a turn, seven teachers cast their contributions primarily as descriptive reports of their classroom activities and progress. The remaining four participants (two teachers and two interns) explicitly introduce some issue or problem with which they are struggling; these problem statements and the related discussions account for more than 75% of the time spent in checking in, 20 of 26 minutes.

The problem posed by Tina, an intern teacher from a local university, consumes the group's attention for fully 10 minutes. Tina begins by expressing pleasure in what her students are able to accomplish, but then introduces a dilemma that she has been unable to resolve:

TINA: But the thing about my students is that there's kids that know a lot and then there's kids that you know, feel like they're slow learners. And I'm trying to find group-worthy activities where the kids who are fast learners and the kids who are slow learners, that it can close the gap. So that the kids that are slow learners can contribute and can you know feel smart, but I don't know if I can find activities that are group-worthy, activities like that. Because I can feel the um frustration of the fast learners, like, "this is easy! I already know the answer!" And then there's kids that are slow learners that are like, "give me a chance to find the answer" and it's almost like they kind of give up because they feel like it's a speed competition, like who can get the answer the fastest kind of thing. And I'm trying to close the gap between that and that's been one of my frustrations I think. (Algebra Group Meeting, 9-21-99)

Tina frames the problem as one in which “fast” students constrain the opportunities and erode the motivation of “slow” learners to work through a problem, while the “fast” students express impatience with the pace of activity required to accommodate their “slower” peers. She also frames a solution with which she seeks the group’s assistance or advice—finding activities that could somehow satisfy both groups and “close the gap.” Rather than advising Tina directly about activities, others in the group take up Tina’s framing of the problem as centering on the capacities of “fast” and “slow” students and how they relate to one another and the tasks of the classroom. Carrie, a relatively new teacher, speculates that what Tina is experiencing is a dilemma of well-established status relationships in the classroom:

CARRIE: I wonder if it’s not just the activities you’re doing but also just status. You know? I mean even if you did give them a group-worthy task, those kids who feel like they have low status will just continue to play that *role*...

Guillermo, an experienced teacher and cochair of the department, expands on Carrie’s argument by tackling the very definition of what it means to be “fast” or “slow.”

GUILLERMO: ...what I find is that when I have *mindsets* like that that they get in *my* way in terms of thinking about the curriculum... Um... But I think that’s from thinking about a group of kids as *slow* learners and that’s how we’re *acclimatized* to *think* about learning. Um, one thing I’m thinking about is the ones that are moving through things really quickly, often they’re not stopping to think about what they’re doing, what there is to learn from this activity. So... um. I’m making stuff up because I don’t know your kids. But, but- like find-think of the ones that you think of as fast learners and figure out what they’re slow at. [abridged excerpt]

As the conversation unfolds, the teachers do turn to the possibilities that reside in specific classroom activities (like the “problem of the week”), but now with an eye toward how Tina might interrupt students’ own assumptions about what it means to be “smart” or “fast.”

This, too, strikes me as an instance that embodies the optimistic premise of teacher learning community. The routine of check-in organizes opportunities for everyone to participate and invites the public airing of teaching issues, problems, and uncertainties. It illuminates the way in which systems of classification or categorization organize ways of talking and thinking about students, subject, and teaching. It also suggests how those



systems of classification may also be problematized (“fast kids, slow kids”) in ways that open up spaces for learning and for the transformation of practice. Carrie and Guillermo might have responded with suggestions for activities as Tina requested but focus first on the way that Tina is talking about the students.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, this excerpt suggests the kind of risk and strain to which individuals and groups become vulnerable when teachers put problems of teaching on the table. Tina could well have experienced Carrie’s and Guillermo’s responses as both unresponsive to her plight (her felt need for activities) and as a criticism of her as a teacher (having an inappropriate “mindset”). Perhaps sensitive to those possibilities, Guillermo makes it a point to continue the conversation one on one with Tina after the meeting; in conversations with the research team throughout the study, he underscored the importance of establishing a sense of trust and safety within the group.

The teacher learning potential of this episode is complicated in other ways as well. The full 26-minute check-in segment reveals that not all problems and issues elicit the same kind of attention and participation. The moments for extended consideration of practice are coconstructed in ways whose meaning and significance are not immediately apparent. Of the four problems put forward by teachers and interns on this occasion, two get taken up at length (Jill’s for 6 minutes early in the segment and Tina’s for 10 minutes near the end of the segment). The remaining two are deflected in some manner—one by a joking response from teachers and the other by the presenter’s own rapid change in topic. What might explain the group’s selective attention to problems and issues or to the participants who raise them?

And, finally, what about the classroom accounts rendered by seven of the participants as apparently straightforward descriptions of classroom activity and progress? Consider these excerpts:

JILL: I am introducing guess and check in my warm-ups this week.... My focus this week is perimeter and surface area.

HOWARD: Mine too is perimeter and surface area this week.

LANI: Um, we’re just trying to get off the ground with lab gear...

TINA: I’m going over perimeters and I’m introducing a little bit of surface area...

CARRIE: My goals in warm-ups are getting a geometrical idea of what fraction is and being able to translate something numerical into geometric...

ANNIE: I've been doing a lot of geometric representations with the T-tables...

GUILLERMO: Um, so I started a problem of the week today...

Compared to the discussion of Tina's problem, these declarative statements of activity and progress seem mundane ("I've been doing..." "I'm going over..." "I started..." "My focus this week..."). The teachers make use of certain expected topical categories of high school mathematics (surface area and perimeter, geometric representations). Yet the group's language is also remarkably dense, specialized, and localized in ways that could not be predicted simply by knowing the subject domain. In the full transcript, two teachers speak of how they are using "warm-ups," three teachers refer to "guess and check" and five teachers speak of "lab gear" in ways that suggest that others in the room do and should share an understanding of what those terms mean. It seems likely that this local pedagogical talk serves to animate the standard mathematical topics, leading teachers not only to coordinate their pace and progress but also to envision, for example, what it would look like in practice for each of them to "introduce" surface area.

These localized terms mark what it means to become a knowledgeable and competent member of this group and further how each teacher is positioned to others with regard to issues of mathematics teaching and learning. That is, they establish not only the basis on which the group constitutes a group in the first place but also the basis on which differences among the participants might surface. How might each of these routinized accounts be heard and evaluated by others as an indication of curriculum choices and pace, instructional strategy and its rationales or purposes, views of mathematics, and conceptions of students? However unremarkable the contributions may appear, any one of them could conceivably mark problematic issues in the group or in a given teacher's relationship to the group. How are the participants thereby positioned in relation to each other by how they describe what they are up to in the classroom? What interpretive resources would be needed—by a participant or a researcher—to understand that positioning?

Both the time reserved to talk about writing in the English Department meeting and the check-in routine among the Algebra Group teachers stand out as bounded moments in the teachers' ongoing work when problems of practice appear to have heightened visibility. Both of the highlighted instances—Lynne's reported insight into the limitations of her written feedback to students and Tina's difficulty in teaching "fast kids" and "slow kids" together—entail an explicit move by one or more teachers to disclose a problem of teaching practice and to invite commentary from others as part of ongoing, ordinary group work. These are perhaps the kinds of

moments most clearly anticipated by such terms as “teacher learning community,” and one concern for our ongoing analysis is to look more carefully at when and how such moments arise and unfold.

However, such explicit and focused considerations of teaching problems are not the only occasions for invoking classroom events, circumstances or dilemmas as the teachers pursue their ongoing work. I cannot map out a full array in this paper, but a final excerpt will introduce a tension we came to describe as “getting things done” versus “figuring things out.” In this excerpt, representations of classroom practice arise within ongoing discourse as teachers engage in the collaborative work of curriculum development.

### #3: WEEKLY MEETING OF THE ACADEMIC LITERACY GROUP—THE CHALLENGE OF BEING “ON TRACK”

The Academic Literacy Group consists of five English teachers who have agreed to develop a new ninth-grade course titled Academic Literacy. The course focuses on helping students develop strategies for improving their reading comprehension in high school. The teachers’ aim is to develop a curriculum together and to all teach from the same lesson plans and materials, while also fostering their own professional development. At a meeting of ninth-grade teachers late in the year, a group spokesperson recalls their intent to

really take a stance of inquiry in this process, and really learn from our work, and do our work by asking questions about what our roles were as teachers, and what we thought our students might need to know, and what we would want them to be able to do. And we’ve gone through this process really through questioning ourselves about how everything’s going. (Leigh Jacobs, team presentation at the monthly ninth-grade meeting, March 13, 2000)

When the teachers meet on September 15, school has been underway for a little more than 1 week. Karen Olsen has taken the lead in planning the group’s first curriculum unit, and this is the teachers’ first opportunity to confer about their progress. From informal conversations prior to the meeting, Karen has become aware that other teachers have not been able to maintain the schedule she anticipated in designing the first curriculum unit. As the meeting opens, she says, “I think that what we should maybe talk about for a minute is what does that mean, that we’re all at different places.”

Karen’s statement becomes an occasion for talking from and about the classroom. Teachers first offer explanations for being “off track” or “behind,” all of them resting on certain imperatives and dilemmas of

classroom practice. At the same time, the teachers orient to their shared expectation of closely coordinated teaching, joining Karen in seeing “off track” or “being behind” as a legitimate problem. As they try to calibrate how far “off-track” is acceptable, Patrick says:

PATRICK: I would go for 2–3 [days]. But I also think that 1–2 is realistic. What I’m saying right now is that I think that what’s important for me with my class, especially with these kids who are silent the first 2 days, 3 days, 4 days of school, is setting norms. And I think that my class is actually going to go much faster because of the norms that— not faster than yours, I’m saying much faster than it would have because of what we’re doing now than it would have gone had I not stopped to do some of this stuff....And they also—this whole—I mean I spent a lot longer setting up the [independent reading] logs than I would have thought I needed to do, but it was clear to me from what they were doing that they weren’t doing what I wanted them to do.

Two other teachers (Lora and Leigh) concur that some of the activities that Karen has planned are taking longer to complete than they anticipated, and Leigh adds her observation that individual classes present different challenges and are moving at a different pace from one another:

LORA: And I took a good half an hour going around and helping kids one-on-one with their notebooks because they were a mess and they weren’t getting how to organize them. I mean, I’m behind too.

LEIGH: I’m about the same place that Lora is, but I should also add that I’ve yet to feel in either of my classes that I’ve had a successful lesson. Um, my fourth block class is starting to come together, and so I let this—a little project go a little bit further today because I saw them begin to work together...

Among them, the three teachers (Patrick, Lora and Leigh) construct this set of explanations for being behind:

Explanation 1 (Patrick): Unaccustomed to teaching lessons planned by someone else.

Explanation 2 (Patrick): “Setting norms” for participation in my class takes precedence over lesson pace and curriculum coverage right now, and will make it possible to move faster later.

Explanation 3 (Patrick): The process of “setting up” the materials and routines for a particular activity (weekly student reading logs) took longer than anticipated by the plan.

Explanation 4 (Lora, extending Patrick #3): Everything has taken longer than anticipated by the plan.

Explanation 5 (Leigh, extending Patrick #2): Have had to adjust pace and approach differently in each of two classes.

Explanation 6 (Lora, extending Patrick #2 and Leigh #5): Time-consuming one-on-one trust-building necessary with some “challenging” students who have “roadblocks” to participation and learning.

Through their explanations for being behind or “off-track,” the teachers appeal to “realistic” versus unrealistic expectations for coordinating curriculum. They invoke individual priorities that center on responsiveness to particular students and classroom dynamics, and suggest that those independent responsibilities take precedence over collective agreements about curriculum content and pacing. In effect, the three teachers’ successive explanations position them as a coalition with the potential to shift the direction of the group’s coordinated activity.

The significance of the “on-track” issue becomes apparent as the meeting continues: in a meeting nominally organized to pursue planning and coordination for the next curriculum unit, 51% of transcript lines focus on whether or how the group will stay on track together for this one. Teachers invoke classroom scenarios and considerations in ways that achieve their primary situational relevance in relation to the coordination work they are attempting to manage.

Further, the teachers’ shared concern for resolving this problem of coordination subordinates or reorients other discussions centering on classroom dilemmas. In the following transcript excerpt, the group is discussing Patrick’s suggestion that those who are behind could eliminate the independent reading projects scheduled for Fridays. Patrick and Margaret both admit to ambivalence about such an arrangement, arguing that “something’s got to give,” but anticipating students’ disappointment:

PATRICK: I’m worried about telling them that we’re not going to read on Fridays, because right now [independent reading] is something they absolutely crave.

MARGARET: I know, me too.

Their comments take Lora by surprise (her students have not shown enthusiasm for independent reading), and an exchange ensues. In some respects, this exchange parallels those moments illustrated by the two examples outlined previously, in which a teacher discloses a problem of classroom practice and explicitly invites commentary or assistance:

LORA: What am I doing wrong? Mine are just like, they're all like whew...

PATRICK: Oh, really?

LORA: Yeah, they can stop reading.

MARGARET: I think it just depends on the class. I tried it last year and it didn't work as well as it's going this year.

PATRICK: It's a classroom culture thing.

LORA: Okay.

PATRICK: Whole groups of kids can get into each other's mind set in just a little bit, and be happy if that's what they got.

MARGARET: And the kids who talk are, like they're readers, the ones in my class, which rarely happens in the past. You know, like they'll put (?) reading, like the people reading (?) are going, yeah, this happened, this happened.

LORA: I heard some of that in your class. Third block?

MARGARET: Maybe.

LORA: "I read this and this is going on and" and then I thought...

MARGARET: That rarely happens.

LORA: ...why can't I elicit this kind of comment?

PATRICK: You can.

MARGARET: I totally agree with you, it's a class culture, and I have a lot of readers in my class.

PATRICK: I don't have a lot of readers in my class, but I have sort of like, they were really frustrated with [independent reading] the first day, they hated me.

LORA: No, and the reading stuff, they did better today than yesterday. They were at least quiet and reading, but when you guys did your reading survey, did a chunk of them say that they hated to read and they didn't read, and...

MARGARET: I find those really contradictory, I mean with (?) one person they contradict, on the first page, I don't like to read, I mean I love to read...I didn't really find...

PATRICK: It was a strange response.

LORA: I'm concerned about with the solution Patrick, in that, I'm afraid that my students will never get to do [independent reading] projects...

On this occasion, Lora's questions fail to elicit any response centering on what she might do or think about as a teacher in the face of her students' apparent indifference to reading for pleasure. Unlike Lynne's speculation about how her teaching might contribute to her students' problems in writing an interpretive essay, or Guillermo's focus on how Tina might redefine her response to "fast" and "slow" students, Patrick and Margaret attribute Lora's difficulty to a "classroom culture" that exists independent of a teacher's action. Lora might take comfort from their reassurance, but she could also conceivably conclude that teachers can expect to remain relatively helpless in the face of students' own predilections and the classroom culture prevailing among them.

Given the increasing specificity of Lora's questions (from "what am I doing wrong?" to "why can't I elicit this kind of comment?") and her inclination to probe into Patrick's and Margaret's assertions about their students (questioning what they found in their survey of reading attitudes and habits), it is possible that this conversation might have progressed to a more thorough examination of the teachers' assumptions, arguments, and practices. Karen and Leigh remain noticeably silent throughout this exchange, while the group's discussion of the coordination problem is left hanging. Perhaps sensitive to Karen's expressed sense of urgency, Lora turns the conversation back to the primary issue at hand—how to keep the group on track.<sup>7</sup>

#### CLASSROOM REPRESENTATIONS AS RESOURCES FOR PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITY AND TEACHER LEARNING

Acknowledging that this analysis is still in its early stages, I draw on these three episodes of teacher interaction to ground some provisional observations about representations of classroom practice as resources for professional community and teacher learning.

#### DECONTEXTUALIZED... AND RECONTEXTUALIZING

Teachers introduce classroom considerations and evoke classroom details in ways that illuminate selected aspects of classroom realities, sometimes

vividly—students who are silent, intimidated, or dominating and activities that go slowly or quickly, well, or poorly. Yet these are decontextualized, disembodied accounts of the classroom. We might reasonably ask what one could expect of them as resources for professional community and for teachers' learning about classroom practice. By comparison to the tailors' shops described in Lave and Wenger (1991), in which the ongoing practice of constructing garments and engaging in the social relations of the shop are available to the apprentice's eye and ear (if only gradually accessible to direct participation), the situated practices of the classroom arise in out-of-classroom talk as discrete, condensed and desituated. Neither we nor the participants can grasp the full meaning of what Karen refers to by "settling in" activities, or what "setting norms" amounts to in Patrick's classroom, or what Tina interprets as the attributes of "fast kids, slow kids."

And yet these decontextualized accounts form pervasive and meaningful elements of the talk among the teachers in these out-of-classroom exchanges. To describe these classroom accounts as brief, condensed, and disembodied is not to suggest that they are meaningless or unimportant. Making sense of one another's stories, speculations, explanations, comments, jokes, complaints, and observations—treating them as situationally meaningful and adequate for some purpose—is a central and constitutive feature of teachers' collective practice. And it is in this sense that these decontextualized representations of the classroom are also recontextualizing, supplying substantive resources for the group's joint work, conveying its dominant orientation toward teaching practice, and negotiating what it means to be a teacher in this group. What shows up as an account of classroom practice, and how it is taken up or not, is significant in that regard.

#### UNPACKING PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITY

Because they are at one and the same time decontextualized and recontextualized, pervasive but often ambiguous, these portrayals of classroom practice present both participants and researchers with problems of interpretation (see also Little, 2002). Among them, three have surfaced prominently in this analysis.

First, accounts of classroom practice are generally opaque by comparison to lived or observed classroom practice. A central interest of this analysis has been the degree of transparency with which classroom practice comes to be portrayed in out-of-classroom interactions. Yet the classroom accounts that surface in these interactions tend to rely heavily on a certain shorthand terminology, and on condensed narratives that convey something of the press of classroom life without fully elaborating its circumstances or dynamics (as when Patrick justifies taking the time for "setting norms").<sup>8</sup>



Second, classroom accounts are partial, selective, and situationally relevant in time and space, making the face of practice differentially available both across individuals or groups and when considered against the range of classroom practice. Classroom representations arise not necessarily with regard to their relevance in the classroom but in relation to some immediate topic or some work immediately at hand among the teachers; they cannot be interpreted independent of the whole enterprise that constitutes the joint work or practice of the group. What particular representations prove situationally relevant to the group's work at the moment? Whose representations matter and how?

Finally, accounts of classroom practice are time-compressed, fleeting moments commonly interspersed in a dense trajectory of dialogue. The Algebra Group's regular check-in routine offers one means to sustain opportunity for talk about practice, but the opportunities for extended talk remain short (on this occasion, 26 minutes to accommodate 11 people) and differentially distributed, from fewer than 1 minute to 10 minutes. In every group, teachers monitor the clock ("it's 5:00," "we have 11 minutes left") or otherwise demonstrate a sensitivity to time, task, and pace, as when Lora abandons discussion of her classroom dilemma to return to the question of getting "on track." Altogether, representations and considerations of classroom practice in the ongoing stream of talk tend to have a certain ephemeral character.

As in any stream of naturally occurring discourse, the teachers' talk serves as a principal resource in getting on with their work, while simultaneously reflecting and constructing the identities of and social relations among the teachers.<sup>9</sup> The ongoing talk both conveys and constructs what it means to teach and to be a teacher, and to do so in this school, with these students and among these colleagues. Representations of classroom practice occupy a central place in that talk and thus in the public construction of teaching practice and professional relationships. In these and other occasions throughout our data, the teachers employ talk about classrooms to justify themselves and their choices to one another and to rehearse how they will justify their choices to their colleagues outside the group, to parents, and to students. Their explanations and their subsequent "solutions" play a part in revealing (and either reconciling or intensifying) the tensions between their collective obligations and their individual priorities, preferences, and intentions.

Although this analysis derives wholly from records of situated interaction, our in-depth interviews and informal exchanges with teachers, together with member checks based on our preliminary analysis, are consistent with the interpretations developed here, especially with regard to (a) the overall value placed on collaboration within the teacher group as a resource for teacher learning and instructional improvement, (b) the

multiple purposes and agendas that teachers seek to accommodate whenever they come together, and (c) the tension between opportunities for inquiry or problem solving and the felt press to pursue tasks of curriculum development and coordination.

## CONCLUSION

This paper responds directly to growing interest among researchers and professional developers in how teachers learn from and in practice, and further, to a compelling policy interest in whether and how investments in teachers' time together outside the classroom might actually produce or support instructional improvement inside the classroom. In this analysis, I have begun to examine the intellectual, social, and material resources of professional community, particularly as those are constituted through representations of classroom practice in out-of-classroom interaction.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the interpretive challenges outlined previously, analysis of teachers' situated interaction offers purchase on how teachers employ representations of classroom practice in the course of everyday work outside the classroom, and how those representations constitute resources for teacher community and teacher learning. In some respects, these three episodes confirm and illustrate the features that have come to be associated with "teacher learning communities" on the basis of interview and survey studies (see especially McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; also Little, 1999; Louis & Kruse, 1995; Westheimer, 1998). That is, the groups demonstrably reserve time to identify and examine problems of practice; they elaborate those problems in ways that open up new considerations and possibilities; they readily disclose their uncertainties and dilemmas and invite comment and advice from others; and artifacts of classroom practice (student work, lesson plans, and the like) are made accessible. In all these ways, the groups display dispositions, norms, and habits conducive to teacher learning and the improvement of teaching practice.

However, our audio- and videotaped records of situated practice reveal aspects of teacher community that are less readily apparent in interview or survey data alone. To begin, these records show with needed specificity what is available for consideration by way of talk and material artifacts—that is, what is brought within the horizon of observation. In their interviews, teachers in our study show similarities with those in other studies focused on teacher learning community: They express a felt responsibility to student success, an orientation toward instructional innovation, and a commitment to close and supportive collaboration with colleagues. Yet the specific resources made available in their out-of-classroom exchanges differ markedly. What is available in the Academic Literacy Group episode, for

example, centers largely on problems for the coordination of the activities and pace of classroom instruction, while the resources available in the Algebra Group episode center on ways of thinking about and responding to students' learning difficulties in mathematics. Each episode displays something of the nature of "affordances" in professional community—the ways in which the practices of the group open up some opportunities and constrain or close off others. Of course, these are single episodes, insufficient for generalizing about the groups as environments for teacher learning. Of interest in our ongoing analysis is the configuration of problems, issues, and resources across time.

Further, records that preserve the flow of interaction show how teachers coconstruct representations of practice, in part through the ways that they reify or interrupt the language of practice (e.g., "norming" or "fast kids, slow kids"). Tracing the trajectory of these coconstructions within and across episodes, groups, and time will enable us to link the general normative disposition of a teacher community with specific resources for teaching practice and teacher learning that its members make accessible (e.g., resources for helping students learn algebra). Systematic attention to participation patterns (who contributes in what ways? what participation norms and structures emerge?) additionally shows how opportunities to learn and participate are also collectively shaped, coconstructed, and distributed.

One might reasonably raise the concern that formation of tightly bounded professional communities with their specialized language and stock of familiar classroom stories (what Rosebery & Warren, 1998, have termed "canonical stories") might result in highly isolated and insular groups—in effect replacing the isolated classroom teacher with the isolated teacher group and balkanized workplace (e.g., Hargreaves & Macmillan, 1995). While acknowledging that there are important issues of group boundary and orientation here, the salient point for the present analysis is that the particularities of language are fundamental and constitutive features of any community of practice (on this point, see Brown & Duguid, 1991; Goodwin, 1994; Wenger, 1998). They simultaneously present resources for the group's members and pose challenges to newcomers, including researchers.

Finally, these situated records complicate some of the existing typologies of teacher community by showing how ongoing interactions both open up and close off opportunities for teacher learning and consideration of practice—in the same groups and sometimes the same moments. Even within these groups that would reasonably be considered collaborative, innovative, and committed to improving practice, teacher learning seems both enabled and constrained by the ways that the teachers go about their work. The force of tradition and the lure of innovation seem simultaneously

and complexly at play in the teachers' everyday talk. Habitual ways of thinking or acting coincide closely with moments of surprise ("aha"); the impulse to question practice resonates against the press simply to get on with it. If we are to understand more fully what distinguishes particularly robust professional communities, we may have to understand the interplay of the conventional and the creative in all of them.

This analysis has been designed to build on—but also to deepen and challenge—research of the last decade that has steadily converged on a claim that strong professional communities are important contributors to instructional improvement and school reform. Claims about the generative power of professional community for individual development and for whole-school reform frequently founder on evidence that not much has changed at the level of teaching and learning in the classroom. There are many reasons for conservatism of teaching practice, but one avenue is to explore what constructions of practice are afforded by and through the ordinary workplace exchanges that constitute teachers' communities of practice. Looking close up at teacher interaction, across a range of settings—both in formally organized professional development and in naturally occurring school workplace contexts—will further open the black box of professional community and show when and how it is conducive, or not, to the transformation of teaching.

### *Notes*

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2 Of course, there are other problems of professional community and teacher development worth considering in a more comprehensive research agenda. Most central among them is how strong traditional communities are created and sustained and what constitutes teacher learning within those communities. Further, our focus on groups with high rates of personal interaction and high levels of interdependence results in relative inattention to the more diffuse professional interactions and learning trajectories of teachers whom Huberman (1993) described as "independent artisans."

3 See also Wenger (1998) on the related concept of reification. It is in the reifications, including classification schemes, that the historical and institutional characteristics of teaching as an occupation are made particularly evident in the more microinteractions of day-to-day work.

4 I credit Maryl Gearhart with introducing me to the contemporary use of this term in cognitive science and with suggesting its use for analysis of teachers' workplace learning.

5 This episode is the last of three major segments in the meeting. In the first two segments, the department members (1) consider a possible teacher education partnership with a nearby university and its implications for the department's existing relationships with other

teacher education programs and (2) talk about possible purposes and processes for introducing peer observation among the English teachers this year.

6 Horn (2001, 2002) offers a more complete and fine-grained analysis of Tina's problem and its treatment. The full exchange constitutes what Horn terms an "episode of pedagogical reasoning"; she illuminates how specific discourse routines ("replays" and "rehearsals") become resources for teacher learning and how teachers' explicit awareness of classificatory schema ("fast kids, "slow kids") enables them to interrogate and interrupt traditional practice.

7 Relying solely on audiotape, it is not possible to examine the nonverbal stances exhibited by the participants and to gauge any indications of impatience from the others. However, Karen has already indicated to the group that she finds this a problem of some urgency. Early in the meeting, she declares: "All I'm saying is that I think that I'm stressed about it, and I'm partially stressed because I don't know, I feel this need to stick to the schedule." A few moments later she adds, "And as you all, I'm sure, haven't figured out yet, I'm incredibly anal about knowing what I'm doing. You know, I can't stand just even, you know, not knowing what I'm going to teach in two weeks. It's difficult for me. So if we're going to be off [track], I want to know."

8 This is not to say that to observe practice directly or to observe videotaped records of classroom life is to grasp completely what its participants "know" and act on. On the limitations of video records as a resource for understanding teacher knowledge, intentions, and practical decision making in the classroom, see Lampert (2000).

9 One of the fruits of the marriage between ethnomethodology and conversational analysis has been to underscore two central features of talk as social practice: the simultaneity and multiplicity of meanings constructed through talk, gesture, and material artifacts and the use of various devices, including classifications schemes, to create and sustain social order and to remedy ambiguity and uncertainty of meaning. The relevant literature is large and spans several disciplines, but see Erickson (1992), Gumperz and Hymes (1972), Hanks (1996), Kjolseth (1972), Moerman (1988), Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974), and ten Have and Psathas (1995).

10 As noted earlier, others have begun to contribute valuable research on teachers' participation in formal occasions of professional development. Elsewhere, my colleagues and I have also addressed issues of the sustainability of teacher community and its bearing on career commitment (Little & Bartlett, 2002) and the relationship of robust workplace communities to students' learning opportunities (Horn, 2001, 2002).

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