Preface

The Evolution of a Design

Five years ago when I transitioned into my position as director of professional learning for a large urban district, it became and continues to be my passion to support schools and the educators in my district with high-quality professional learning. There was little to no specificity for how to accomplish this daunting and exhilarating task for a person who had been in a central office position for only 3 months. Therefore, I really had to depend on my previous experiences to guide me. I had previously served in the capacity of teacher, school social worker, assistant principal, principal, and assistant director, with 11 years as an administrator. Through those lenses, I had a good idea of what quality professional learning should feel like at the end of the day and what it should look like in practice. Those critical positions afforded me opportunities to design professional learning at my worksites for colleagues, and on several occasions, I was provided an opportunity to share my levels of expertise with colleagues outside of my worksite.

As an administrator, my keen skill was that of providing resources for those I supported, and for me, the greatest resource in support of them being effective in their positions was quality adult learning experiences. I found that the experiences were richer when this work was done collaboratively with colleagues and they moved from their isolated areas of expertise and shared their talents with each other. As a building administrator, it was

rare that I would use my small pot of funds to bring in a consultant on staff development days. I found it more beneficial to have the staff learn from each other. Since I was privileged to have knowledge of everyone's skills as the principal, I knew a little secret that they did not know about each other that I believed would be beneficial to them all. That secret was their qualifications, talents, and passions for a variety of teaching strategies. I had all the expertise that was needed to prepare and support an effective staff. I needed to provide them an effective format in which they could share their collective talents. Back in the days before I even knew the term *professional learning communities*, I started to build community around the learning goals of the staff in my building. Perhaps my background as a social worker has always led me to support the interconnectedness that humans thrive from, and creating those structures in my school environments through professional learning was always my desire. Over the years as an administrator, I saw the power of me and my staff learning together in teams and building off the knowledge that was collectively shared through these experiences.

When given the opportunity as a district leader in the Department of Professional Learning, I was determined to recreate this feeling of interconnectedness, this practice of learning from each other, from other schools, and other educators. It was my way of extending my territory. However, I had a serious barrier to this type of structure. As I set forth on this journey, there was one barrier that would allow me to physically impact only a few educators due to the size of the district and the human resources that were afforded to me to get the job done. I serve a district of more than 13,000 employees, with approximately 7,000 of them being classroom teachers. From the northernmost end to the southern tip, we are geographically 246 square miles. The essential question was, "How could I accomplish this type of learning experience" with more than 7,000 teachers, 5 staff members, and a dwindling budget.

Soon after my feet hit the ground running as the director of the department and I was given the opportunity to set some goals and move full speed ahead, I started to research viable options for extending the opportunity of high-quality professional

learning experiences with a focus on learning communities. I took my team of five and assigned them approximately 30 schools to support. Their task was to connect with the principals and offer them an opportunity to take their staff through a process of team development and focused professional learning centered on their school's data and goals. Along the way, there was a great amount of research being done on this novel idea of "professional learning communities." Wow, I think I now understood and had a model for my grassroots effort to bring my teachers together years ago. How grand it would be if I could do this across the entire district. I was excited, I was ambitious, and I was ready to go spread the gospel about these professional learning communities to every principal who would allow us to knock on the door and partner up with the staff.

As great as this idea was, after about 10 months of this spreading like wildfire and getting the principals engaged around this great idea, I realized a few things. I realized that I would never be able to provide this face-to-face service to all 146 schools in the district within the next 5-year cycle. I realized that I was wearing my team down and they were not able to focus on any of the other equally important initiatives we were implementing out of the department. I realized that I had to think of another viable option to build capacity for this type of learning for educators while at the same time making sure it was sustained after we walked out the door.

Over the past 3 years, some major shifts occurred in my quest to extend this valuable opportunity of learning to more and more educators through building capacity and sustainable structures. It has been a true evolution to what is now the most viable option. As I set out on the journey for this option, I tried a few structures of supporting my desire to implement professional learning communities in schools. I was fortunate enough to partner with the experts in the area of professional learning community. Several years ago, I hosted a session in the district with the Dufours through video conferencing. I recall thinking how powerful it was to use this technology tool and provide learning around this concept in an auditorium to more than 500 educators. In addition, 2 years ago, I was also able to engage in a Professional Learning

Communities Institute with Shirley Hord, Bill Sommers, and Jim Roussin. They visited our district on five occasions throughout that year and spent 2 to 3 days with my team and teams of educators. They engaged my team and 11 principals and their teams through a yearlong intensive study on the implementation of professional learning communities. These principals, teacher leaders, and district leaders have now been utilized in the district as resident experts and have presented at local conferences for large groups of other teachers and administrators in the district. Through these extensive learning opportunities, my team and I developed a curriculum in support of guiding schools with the implementation of professional learning communities. We spent time visiting schools, but in addition, we hosted a weekly webinar, providing each school the tools to engage in this virtual opportunity while remaining at their school site. All of these attempts led me closer to understanding the power of technology to bring large groups together.

We ventured out over the past few years to incorporating online learning opportunities for our educators. This is when I could really see how I would build capacity for high-quality learning structures in the district. Originally, we used ready-made online courses from vendors, and we gave teachers access to enroll in those courses. However, we were not fully satisfied because these valuable opportunities were not always aligned to the needs of our teachers and our district. There was always something missing or added that we did not need. We researched the opportunities to design and develop our own courses. It was this process that led us to develop a process of engagement for participants that supported the concepts of professional learning communities. You will learn about this process as you read this book.

Over the years, I have had the freedom to truly set a vision for what I believed was necessary for the educators in my district to aspire to and remain effective in their roles through targeted adult learning experiences. This process has evolved over time as I have grown and been able to partner with an online course designer, Mrs. Henderson-Rosser, and a team

of quality facilitators to be the conduit of delivering on the promise of high-quality professional learning experiences. As we have transitioned to using online structures for learning, it has always been imperative from the start to take high-quality face-to-face professional learning opportunities and offer them to teachers in their own spaces, places, and times for learning. As this virtual structure of learning is developed and designed, which is now termed the *PLeCampus*, the national standards of professional development were and will remain at the forefront of each course and opportunity offered to teachers. As well, course development in the virtual professional learning community supports the Joyce and Showers (1980) model for what is needed for good professional development.

Ultimately, I would like for the learners in the district to know that there is a partnership that exists between them and other learners in the courses they take or in their schools and other schools. It is my belief that the second-order change will ultimately be seen in the students they support. I want them to know through experience how 2, 3, 30, or even 100 educators can engage in high-powered solution-oriented conversations, collective thinking, collaboration, and planning sessions in virtual learning communities (VLCs) in support of them obtaining exemplary and pervasive student achievement results through this high-quality professional learning experience.

This model of learning has actualized into the Learner–Learner model, which fully supports a symbiotic relationship among learners in a community. It is my desire, passion, and responsibility to execute the design of the Learner–Learner model of professional learning experiences so that this type of interaction can occur. It is my hope that you will read about our journey and can use this model and structure to provide this level of learning and interconnectedness to those you support. What is so very powerful is that wherever you may be, through technology in VLCs, we can always have opportunities to learn from each other. What a way to extend our territory and impact the field of teaching and learning like we have never been able to do before!