Towards a General Theory of SRI’s Intentional Learning Communities

Abundant research suggests that schools where adults learn together in thoughtful, sustained, and persistent ways can improve teacher practice and student learning. (Bryk, 2010; Carroll, Fulton, & Doerr, 2010; Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1994; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; F. Newmann & Whelage, 1995; F. M. Newmann, Smith, Allensworth, & Bryk, 2001; Sebring et al., 2006). However, it is not at all clear how adults in schools learn how to work and learn together, to be reflective, share their practice, focus on student learning, give and get useful feedback, or build shared understandings of fundamental ideas about schooling. Anne Liebermann, for example, notes, “This situation raises important issues for both practitioners and policy makers. Researchers including Little (1990, 2003) and McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) have closely documented elements of successful learning communities, but those studies and others have done less to document the process of implementation. More specifically, there is a lot of discussion about the importance of factors like trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002) and good leadership (Elmore, 2000) in creating and sustaining adult learning situations in schools, but there is less research about exactly how to create community and how principals work to support and monitor PLC efforts to allow for successful changes in practice” (Mindich & Lieberman, 2012).

There is considerable conversation about “learning communities” in schools and the literature about schools. Some communities are “professional;” some are “purposeful”; others are “communities of practice.” There is a lot of talk and lots of different (and often confusing) language. Moreover, Richard DuFour who coined the term “professional learning community” has remarked that the “term has been used so ubiquitously that it is danger of losing all meaning (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005, p. 31) In SRI’s view, in order to make a difference, learning communities need to be rigorous, collaborative, focused on learning, and built upon shared norms and values. In other words, they need to be intentional.

At their best, SRI’s Intentional Learning Communities (ILCs) are places where educators work together to learn the skills of reflecting, collaborating, deprivatizing practice, and exposing and exploring fundamental assumptions. ILCs by this definition are where groups build shared norms and values and hold each other accountable for being faithful to them.

What often attracts educators to the idea of an Intentional Learning Community is its apparent simplicity. ILCs are structures that support adult learning in schools. They are groups of educators who meet regularly with the goal of improving teaching and learning and are characterized by: (1) skilled facilitation, and (2) the use of protocols to guide adult learning. This simple structure assumes that teachers have both things to learn from each other and things to teach each other, and that learning
together will improve their teaching practice, deepen their knowledge of their students, and build a shared understanding of fundamental ideas about schooling. Yet experience and considerable research suggests that this simple idea is neither simple nor easy to implement.

The enactment of the ILC model is influenced by a variety of factors, including the skill of the ILC coach, support of the principal, and the culture of the school. ILCs are also affected by the membership of the group, their reason for being there, focus, time available to meet and even the size and stability of the group. There is a long list.

This “General Theory of Intentional Learning Communities” attempts to situate the simple idea of ILCs within the larger literature and research frameworks around (1) adult development, (2) organizational culture, (3) school change, and (4) transformational learning. Hopefully, situating the ILC concept in this larger, more complex context will help practitioners and researchers explore their understandings and assumptions around why such a simple idea leverages such complex behaviors. However, like any such broad theoretical framework, some of the ideas are very well supported by research, while others are only best guesses. Our hope is that both researchers and practitioners will continue this discussion as a way to understand how critical friendship and facilitative leadership can make schools better for every student.

ILCs: The Simple Idea

One assumption about the apparently simple idea behind ILCs is that for schools to become better places for students, adults have to learn. ILCs help adults learn with and from each other.

How do schools become better places for kids? The answer is not so complicated. Schools become better places for kids when teachers become better teachers, when they relentlessly improve their practice, when they are learners. Moreover, teachers (or any other educators, for that matter) cannot improve their craft in isolation from others. How do teachers improve their practice if they receive no feedback from students or colleagues, if they never observe other adults teach, if other adults never watch them teach, if teachers never look at students’ work with colleagues, or if they never struggle to understand complex pedagogical practices with others? (Breidenstein, Fahey, Glickman, & Hensley, 2012, p. 3)

Many schools have put in place some form of a professional learning community (PLC) in which educators work collaboratively to reflect on their practice, examine evidence of its impact, and make changes to improve teaching and learning (DuFour, 2007; Gillespie, 2010; Hickman, Schrmpf, & Wedlock, 2009; Ikhwan, 2011; Kincannon, 2010; Tormala, 2009; Watts, 2010). However, an Intentional
Learning Community (ILC) is a particular form of learning community characterized by the rigorous use of protocols to build adult learning and attention to the facilitation needed to guide that learning (Bambino, 2005; Bernacchio, Ross, Washburn, Whitney, & Wood, 2007; Bisplinghoff, 2005; Burke, Marx, & Berry, 2011; Cox, 2010; Curry, 2008; F. & F., 1998; Fahey, 2011; Franzak, 2002; Hudson, 2005; Law, 2005; Miech, Nave, & Mosteller, 2001; Silva, 2005; Vo & Nguyen, 2010; Windschitl, Thompson, & Braaten, 2011).

**Use of Discussion Based Protocols**

ILCs are distinguished by the use of structured conversations or protocols (Allen & Blythe, 2004; Easton, 2009; McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & McDonald, 2013). Protocols push against the pull of how things are or how we typically talk, a powerful force in every organization (Schein, 2010). Schools are no exception. The use of protocols helps ILCs as they struggle with not having the same conversation in the same way with the same folks with the same, predictable results. Protocols are the structures that help educators try on different ideas, examine assumptions, ask unsettling questions, and embrace discomfort in a way that is safe and manageable.

The steps embedded in most protocols are designed to help educators go against the grain of interactions that adults usually have in schools (Easton, 2009; McDonald et al., 2013). For example, adults in schools typically work in isolation, yet every protocol asks them to work with a group of colleagues. In many settings, this can be a challenging shift. Besides encouraging collegial work, protocols often support three other against the grain interactions. They are: (1) slowing down, (2) sharing practice, and (3) embracing discomfort (Breidenstein et al., 2012).

**Skilled Facilitation & Coaching**

Protocols are not easy answers, and they certainly don’t facilitate themselves. However, because the forces that conspire against adult learning in schools are so strong, the efficacy of protocols in supporting adult learning is directly related to the degree to which protocols are supported by skilled facilitation. McDonald and colleagues (2013) suggest, “At its heart, facilitation is about participation, ensuring equity, and building trust” (McDonald et al., 2013, p. 15).

In the most successful ILCs there is not only skilled facilitation, but also skilled coaching. The coach does not necessarily facilitate every protocol, but rather asks difficult questions of the group, takes responsibility for the arc of the group’s learning, and persistently pushes towards deeper learning. The work of a coach is complicated and important (Atteberry & Bryk, 2011; Biancarosa, Bryk, & Dexter, 2010; Costa & Garmston, 2002; Ippolito, 2010; Peterson, Taylor, Burnham, & Schock, 2009).

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Having outlined the “simple idea” of Intentional Learning Community, and the two most recognizable elements of protocols and skilled facilitation, it is now possible to tell a more complex story about ILCs, one or that is rooted in four larger frameworks and bodies of research. This more complex account illustrates both the power and challenges of implementing ILCs to leverage changes in teaching and learning in schools.

**Foundational Concept 1: Connecting Adult Collaboration and Student Learning**

As we discussed in the first section, the research is clear that adult collaborative learning can improve teacher practice and student learning (Bryk, 2010; Carroll et al., 2010; Kruse et al., 1994; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; F. Newmann & Whelage, 1995; F. M. Newmann et al., 2001; Sebring et al., 2006). However, it is not at all clear how adults in schools learn to work and learn together, to be reflective, to share their practice, to focus on student learning, to give and receive useful feedback, or to build shared understandings of fundamental ideas about schooling. Vigorous adult collaboration is complex and difficult to achieve.

Andy Hargreaves (and many others following the seminal work of Dan Lortie) points out that the forces of presentism, isolation, and conservatism (Lortie, 1970) that characterize many schools are significant barriers to the kind of adult learning—transformational or otherwise—that could make a difference for students (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009). Simply put, many schools are organized in ways that do not support adult learning, and even actively discourage it (Bryk, 2010; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003).

On the other hand, Newmann and Wehlage (1995) found that schools that were able to work collaboratively, deprivatize their work, focus on teaching and learning, reflect on practice, and maintain shared norms and values improved teacher practice and student learning. The difference between the schools Lortie describes and the ones Newmann describes is that in the second group of schools, adults are learning collaboratively and openly about shared questions of practice (Bryk, 2010).

Figure 1 suggests that schools can be placed along a continuum that represents the degree to which adults collaborate with each other, share practice, reflect on practice, and focus on teaching and learning. These characteristics correlate with increased student learning.

Figure 1
Schools can be found all along this learning continuum. Some schools are very much as Lortie described in 1970, while others collaborate, share practices, and focus on teaching and learning as Newmann describes. Most are somewhere in the middle.

As schools move along this learning continuum—to become places that are more reflective, collaborative, and focused on teaching and learning—not only does the culture of the school change, but the capacity for improving teacher practice and increasing student learning also increases.

Figure 2

However, important research about the school reform efforts of the last twenty years tells us that simply improving teacher classroom practice typically does not result in the fundamental changes needed.
for schools to address issues connected to race, equity, the purpose of schools, or foundational assumptions about teaching and learning (McDonald, 2014). Teachers may learn new literacy strategies—which may improve their teaching practice—but such learning may not resolve or even name the deeper tensions upon which many of our schools are built.

**Foundational Concept 2: School Change Theory**

In general, the literature on school change makes an important distinction between the *improvement* and the *reinvention* of schools. The essential point is that improving schools and reinventing schools are two very different tasks that make very different learning demands on the adults who are asked to carry them out.

School improvement can be accomplished, for example, by adopting a new curriculum, finding a new approach to teaching reading, or implementing extended learning time. School improvement often leans toward what various theorists call “technical” (Heifetz, 1994), “Discourse I” (Eubanks, Parish, & Smith, 1994), or “first order” (Cuban & Usdan, 2002) approaches. The list of improvements schools regularly adopt is long and varied: teaching phonemic awareness, writing across the curriculum, wearing uniforms, single sex classrooms, and expanded AP programs are just a few examples. Most of these improvements are research-based, and often make schools better places for kids. Each one has their advocates. However, each of these changes could be considered “technical” or “first order” because they do not necessarily require fundamental shifts in the way adults in schools think about and enact their work.

School reinvention is different. The reinvention of schools might be considered “adaptive” (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009), “Discourse II” (Eubanks et al., 1994), or “second order” (Cuban & Usdan, 2002) work. School reinvention asks educators to not only adopt a new program or approach, but also to rethink what it means to be a teacher and to challenge closely held assumptions about schools, teaching practice and students. School reinvention requires us to rethink fundamental aspects of schooling such as who students are, how students are grouped for instruction, how we choose to use time, or what it means to be an educator committed to equitable teaching practice.

School *reinvention* necessarily builds on school *improvement*. While the work of both school *improvement* and school *reinvention* require adult learning, it is important to understand that school *reinvention* requires adults to understand their learning experiences in different and more complicated ways than does school *improvement*.

Thinking about the more challenging learning demands that school reinvention exacts from adults in schools brings us to our third concept: Transformational Learning Theory.

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Foundational Concept 3: Transformational Learning Theory

Ideally, school improvement and reinvention are driven not by what and how the adults in a school learn but by what students need. However, educators are likely to conceptualize “what students need” very differently from one another. Naturally, the more capacity educators have for complex learning, the more capacity the school has for change, improvement, and reinvention (Argyris, 1999; Senge, 2006). Conversely, if adults in a school (including those in positions of formal authority) have little capacity or desire for complex, challenging learning, then it seems unlikely they will be able to immediately engage in the transformative learning needed to reinvent the school. In order to reinvent schools, most adults need to learn to construct meaning in unfamiliar, more complicated and challenging ways. The literature on adult learning calls this learning how to learn in more complicated ways “transformative learning” (Mezirow, 2000). Transformative (or transformational) learning is the learning that challenges adults in schools to adopt different and more complicated ways of making meaning. It is also at the heart of the “work” of an Intentional Learning Community.

Transformational learning theory makes a critical distinction between informational and transformational learning. Informational learning is the learning that increases what we know, but not who we are or how we understand our world. It is at the heart of school improvement.

Changes in one’s fund of knowledge, one’s confidence as a learner, one’s self perception as a learner, one’s motives in learning, one’s self esteem—these are all potentially important kinds of changes, all desirable, all worthy of teachers thinking about how to facilitate them. But it is possible for any or all of these changes to take place without any transformation because they could all occur within the existing form or frame of reference. (Mezirow, 2000, p. 51)

Transformational learning is different. It is learning that changes not only what we know, but also how we know what we know, and even who we are. Transformational learning is required for school reinvention. Mezirow (2000) explains,

Transformational learning refers to the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted references (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open emotionally, capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action. Transformative learning involves participation in constructive discourse to use the experiences of others to assess reasons justifying these assumptions, and taking an action decision based on the resulting insight. (p. 7)

Informational and transformational learning can be seen as ends of a learning continuum, and all learning experiences can be found somewhere along this continuum. Many informational learning
experiences in schools are valuable, and while they might improve our practice and our school, they do not surface or question the hidden assumptions underpinning that practice or school. It is only when a learning experience is pulled towards the transformational, does the possibility of surfacing, facing, questioning, and challenging fundamental, taken-for-granted assumptions arises. School reinvention requires transforming our taken-for-granted assumptions. Figure 3 summarizes the informational/transformational-learning continuum.

Figure 3

The distinction between informational learning and transformational learning is critical for understanding SRI’s ILCs. As research suggests, schools that can become more reflective, collaborative places are able to improve teaching practice and thereby increase student learning. This is very much at the heart of school improvement. The adult learning that happens in these schools can be described as primarily informational. Enacting school based informational learning can be challenging because it often requires a change in the culture of a school. However, informational learning does not lead to the reinvention of schools, to the tackling of difficult questions about race or equity, or to questioning fundamental assumptions about teaching, learning, and students. Only schools where transformational learning happens have the capacity for this more foundational and challenging work.

Transformational learning theory suggests that the engine that propels transformational (as opposed to informational) learning is reflective discourse. “Reflective discourse involves a critical assessment of assumptions. It leads towards clearer understanding by tapping collective experience to arrive at a tentative best judgment” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 11). Reflective discourse is the engine that drives the transformational learning that moves adults to more complicated ways of knowing and equips them for the adaptive work needed to reinvent schools.
Reflective discourse that leads to transformational learning is a complicated learning event that, like most SRI work, is typically enacted over a significant period of time in very complex contexts. Mezirow states:

Feelings of trust, solidarity, security and empathy are essential preconditions for full participation in discourse. Discourse is not based on winning arguments; it centrally involves finding agreement, welcoming difference, “trying on” other points of view, identifying the common in the contradictory, tolerating the anxiety implicitly in paradox, searching for synthesis, and reframing. (Mezirow, 2000, p. 12)

Transformational learning theory also holds that the goal of any transformational learning is to “guide more useful, more justified action.” “Transformative learning involves participation in constructive discourse to use the experience of others to assess reasons, justifying these assumptions, and making an action based on the resulting insight ” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 8). Transformational learning not only demands questioning assumptions, managing anxiety, and challenging comfortable habits of mind, it also demands action—changes in practice based on new, more useful ways of thinking. SRI’s work can be thought of as helping adults to create structures and contexts that serve as “holding environments” (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 155); these environments support reflective discourse and hold their members mutually accountable to put the learning from that discourse into practice.

Figure 4 suggests that the engine that turns informational learning into transformational learning is reflective discourse. It also suggests that groups that are experienced with reflective discourse can act as a transformational learning community at some times and as an informational learning community at other times. However, a group that has always acted in informational ways will struggle with transformational learning, something they have never experienced or imagined, while an experienced transformational learning community can more easily act in informational ways if the task demands it.
Thinking about the more challenging transformational learning demands that school reinvention exacts from adults in schools brings us to our fourth concept: Adult Development Theory.

**Foundational Concept 4: Adult Development Theory**

If school improvement and school reinvention make different learning demands on adults in schools, then any SRI theory of action needs to take into account the different ways that adults in schools understand these different demands. Constructive Developmental Theory (Kegan, 1998)—which explains how adults intellectually grow and develop over time—can help us do this. The fundamental tenets of Constructive Developmental Theory are:

1. Adults continually work to make sense of their experiences (constructive).
2. The ways that adults make sense of their world can change and grow more complex over time (developmental).
3. Four of the most common ways adults understand their worlds can be described as *instrumental, socializing, self-authoring, and self transformational.*

Each stage of adult development can be seen as a “way of knowing” or a “meaning making system” that effects how we understand our world. Figure 5 shows a container that is a metaphor for the meaning making system of an instrumental knower. The container holds all of the knowledge, skills, dispositions, habits and assumptions of the instrumental knower. Instrumental knowers fill up their containers by searching for authority, finding right answers and following concrete processes. They can be very uncomfortable with reflection, collaboration or the messy consensus building that often happens in groups.
Instrumental knowers (and all knowers for that matter) can take in large amounts of informational (as opposed to transformational) learning—learning that fills them up with new content, new strategies, and new knowledge. Figure 6 suggests that informational learning easily fills up the meaning-making container of the instrumental knower without changing their way of knowing.

The meaning-making container holds informational learning; however, the informational learning does not change the container itself. The instrumental knower fills up the container by looking for right answers, looking to authority or following specific processes. In schools, a teacher can develop a tremendous knowledge of children’s literature by reading hundreds of chapter books, yet never re-think her assumptions about how children learn to read literary fiction versus informational texts critically and analytically.
The larger and more robust meaning-making container of assumptions of socializing knowers is pictured in figure 7. The socializing way of knowing is centered on groups. The socializing knower makes meaning by working in groups, by reflecting on other’s perspectives and building consensus.

Figure 7

As is the case with instrumental knowers, socializing knowers can fill up their meaning-making container with informational learning without changing the container itself.

Only transformational learning (Mezirow, 1969) can change our meaning-making containers and creates room for more complex, messy ways of understanding the world. Informational learning can fill the container but only transformational learning can change the container so that it has more room for more complicated ideas. Figure 8 describes the relationship between instrumental and socializing knowers.

Figure 8.

The meaning-making container of the socializing knower provides room for more complicated ways of constructing learning that no longer rely solely on the instrumental knower’s concrete processes and specific answers, but also takes into account the perspectives of others. However, a socializing knower always has the capacity to act as an instrumental knower when the context requires it. The instrumental knower requires transformational learning in order to act as a socializing knower.
As adults continue to develop and increase their capacity for holding increasingly complex ideas, their meaning-making containers continue to change as well. Constructive development theory calls the next two stages of adult development “self-authoring” and “self-transformative (Kegan, 1998).” Figure 9 describes the meaning-making containers of self-authoring and self-transformative knowers.

Figure 9.

In every school, there are likely to be instrumental, socializing, self-authoring and self-transformative knowers who experience learning opportunities in different ways. An instrumental knower might experience an opportunity to complete a collaborative inquiry project with other teachers as a waste of time until she figures out how to get her classroom organized or learns the school’s new math program. A socializing knower who thrives on teamwork might be uncomfortable when that teamwork starts to uncover issues of race and class that require her to take a stand independent of her grade-level team or department. The self-authoring knower might find a PowerPoint presentation on bullying too prescriptive and consider it a mechanism to avoid difficult questions.

Self-transformative knowers are persistently suspicious of the “wholeness, distinctness, completeness or priority” (p. 321) of their own assumptions and ways of looking at the world. For example, Kegan describes the self-transformative view of conflict like this:

The protracted nature of our conflict suggests not just that the other side will not go away, but that it probably should not. The conflict is a likely consequence of one or both of us making prior, true, distinct and whole, our partial position. The conflict is potentially a reminder of our
tendency to pretend completeness when we are in fact incomplete. We may have this conflict because we need it to recover our true complexity. (Kegan, 1998, p. 319)

Instrumental knowers avoid conflict. Socializing knowers accept conflict, but not with their own group. Self-authoring knowers are comfortable with conflict and with their own assumptions. Self-transformative knowers embrace conflict because it opens the door to increasingly authentic, useful, and more complex versions of themselves. Each stage of adult development represents a more complicated way of understanding the world and one’s place in it (Kegan, 1998). Adult development also builds organizational capacity for school improvement and reinvention, although school reinvention requires more organizational capacity than school improvement. Figure 10 sums up the relationship between the different stages of adult development.

Figure 10

Constructive Developmental Theory acknowledges that adults can adopt different learning stances in different situations. A self-authoring knower may find the PowerPoint on bullying too prescriptive and a mechanism to avoid difficult questions, but the self-authoring knower can certainly act as an instrumental knower for a while and absorb the content of the presentation if necessary. On the other hand, even when the situation requires it, an instrumental knower will struggle with a collaborative inquiry project that requires socializing or self-authoring learning; they might not know how to operate in the complicated way the project demands. As with all developmental learning, it is much easier for a learner’s behavior to reflect the characteristics of a stage that they have previously experienced rather
than the characteristics of a stage they cannot imagine. A self-authoring or self-transformative knower can strategically act in instrumental ways because they have already experienced that stage themselves. It is difficult for the instrumental knower to act in self-authoring ways, a stage they cannot yet envision.

Moreover, Constructive Developmental Theory does not argue that one way of knowing is fundamentally better than another, although at first glance the language may seem quite hierarchical. Constructive Developmental Theory provides an answer to the question, “What does it take to…” Following a musical example, for a guitar player, it takes knowledge of some strumming patterns and basic chord shapes played at the top of the neck to play folk music. Folk music is a powerful and moving musical form. On the other hand, it takes something else to be a Rhythm and Blues player. The R and B player needs the musical development of the folk player plus knowledge of the entire neck of the guitar, many chord forms and progression, and the use of the pentatonic scales. R and B is also a beautiful musical form, but it requires a more complicated set of musical skills than folk music. Similarly, it takes an even more complex set of musical knowledge skills and dispositions to play jazz. Folk music, R and B and Jazz are all powerful and beautiful forms but the jazz player needs all of the musical development of the R and B player plus the ability to play scales, modes, arpeggios, complex rhythms and altered chords. The jazz player can play a folk tune but the folk musician struggles to play jazz. Each musical form demands something different from a musician. It just takes something different to play folk music, R and B and Jazz. In schools, different sages of development are more suited to different task. The instrumental knower is expert at implementing new programs, the socializing knower is adept at working with groups, the self-authoring learning is comfortable with difficult issues. Each stage of adult development is very suited for some school based tasks and contexts and ill suited for others. Some musicians play beautiful folk music; others beautiful jazz.

Constructive Developmental Theory suggests that individuals at different stages of adult development might experience anxiety or satisfaction depending on the match between the personal and professional tasks at hand and the degree to which an individual is able to learn/act effectively in response. In schools, a teacher who is an instrumental knower looking for concrete answers and specific processes, might be able to think, for example, about issues of equitable educational practice. The instrumental knower wants to know the right way to line kids up for recess without disturbing other classes, and how to correctly prepare students for the state assessment, effectively manage the school’s new reading program, and efficiently address the achievement gap. They do not (yet) think in more complicated ways about the purpose of schooling, or issues of race and equity, which are almost always convoluted and paradoxical.
Intentional Learning Communities (ILCs): The Not So Simple Idea

Having explored the theoretical and research underpinnings of the more complex story of ILCs, we now return to a revised and more robust description of the purpose and processes of ILCs. As described above, ILCs are structures that support adult learning in schools. They are groups of educators who meet regularly with the goal of improving teaching and learning. They are characterized by: (1) skilled facilitation, and (2) the use of protocols to guide adult learning.

More specifically, however, an Intentional Learning Community (ILC) is a particular form of learning community designed to provide the focus and structure needed to support the learning of adults who understand the world very differently from one another (instrumental, socializing, self-authoring, etc.). ILCs can support educators at every place along the continuum of adult development. For instrumental knowers, an ILC might help them learn new strategies or implement new curriculum. For socializing knowers, the learning might be focused on improving practice in a particular context by receiving feedback on lesson plans, aligning curriculum, or developing common assessments. For self-authoring knowers the learning might center on issues of equitable educational practice.

However, the ILC that supports a particular stage of adult development is different from an ILC that moves adults from one stage of adult development to another. Informational ILCs can deepen practice, add to a teacher’s repertoire, increase knowledge, expand skills, and improve a school. Informational ILCs support informational knowers becoming better informational knowers, and socializing knowers becoming better socializing knowers. However, informational ILCs do not transform instrumental knowers into socializing knowers or socializing knowers into self-authoring knowers.

Transformational ILCs, on the other hand, challenge educators to not only deepen their practice, but also to question the basis of that practice, to surface and explore the hidden assumptions that sustain that practice. These ILCs, at their best, hold out the possibility of adult development, of helping educators make meaning of their practice and the context in which it is situated in progressively more complex and demanding ways.

ILCs sometimes operate as Informational ILCs, other times as Transformational ILCs. Again, these are ends of a continuum. However, it is possible—and perhaps not even unusual—for an ILC to persistently act as an Informational ILC and move very little along the continuum of school improvement/transformation and adult development. ILCs, and indeed all groups, are developmental (Ballock, 2007). Some grow and continue to challenge themselves; many do not. Some find ways to overcome the natural tendency of groups to find comfortable easy places to be. Some do not.
Figure 7 suggests that ILCs act in ways that support informational or transformational learning. The difference between these two is the degree to which the ILC is characterized by reflective discourse.

The degree to which ILCs act as Transformational ILCs depends on the degree to which they intentionally and persistently engage in “reflective discourse to guide action.”

Informational ILCs do not automatically move educators, groups, or schools from one version of school improvement to another; although, they do help educators become better at the version of school improvement that they are working on. Informational ILCs do not support adult development. Only Transformational ILCs can do that.

Figure 8 describes the different ways that Informational ILCs and Transformational ILCs function and the results that can be expected from each.

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Toward a General Theory of Intentional Learning Communities

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Intentional Learning Communities (ILCs): What, So What, Now What?

Situation the Intentional Learning Community (ILC) concept in the larger theoretical frameworks of adult development, organizational culture, school change, and transformational learning confirms what many facilitators and coaches already understand: The ILC concept, whose simplicity and elegance first attracts educators (and funders, school leaders, and researchers for that matter) becomes a very complicated notion when enacted in a real schools, with real teachers. Situating the ILC concept in this larger framework suggests that ILCs are not only about helping adults learn (the simple idea) but can also be about helping adults develop, to become more complex knowers, and to understand the world in more sophisticated, nuanced ways. Moreover, this framework suggests that for schools to improve beyond the most instrumental ways of learning and working, and particularly for them to reinvent themselves, then adults in schools need to become more complex knowers. They need to learn to understand their experiences in ways that allow them to resist easy answers, expose and explore fundamental assumptions, and accept the ambiguity of persistently taking up adaptive work. ILCs that are informational help educators learn new programs, processes, and specific practices. ILCs that are transformational help educators become the more complex thinkers and knowers needed to reinvent schools.

So what?

School leaders can tell teachers that they need to be socializing knowers or even self authoring knowers because school improvement and school reinvention demands that educators understand their work in complex ways. However, telling a teacher they need to be a more complex knower is no more likely to make them such a knower than telling a first grader that they need to read a *Harry Potter* novel or a second grader that they have to prove the Pythagorean theorem. Telling is not teaching, and adults in schools, just like their students, need to have the opportunity to develop and practice complex skills.

ILCs are important because they open the door both to adult learning (Informational ILCs) and adult development (Transformational ILCs) that school improvement and school reinvention require. They offer an important answer to the question of how effective school wide professional communities (Bryk, 2010; Lieberman & Miller, 2011; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; F. Newmann & Whelage, 1995) could be created.

Now what?

Reframing ILCs as both informational and transformational sheds light on the complexity of what at first seemed to be a simple idea. However, this reframing also raises important questions for practitioners and researchers. A list of such questions might include:

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• How and when does an informational ILC become transformational?
• What facilitator/coaching moves support informational learning? Which support transformational learning? When are each appropriately used?
• What is the difference between facilitating adult learning and coaching it? How are they same?
• How are protocols understood by different adult knowers?
• What is the connection between a leader’s way of knowing and the learning that takes place in a school?
• How does a facilitator/coach effectively work with adult learners at different stages of development who make meaning of the world quite differently?
• Is transformational learning (and the reinvention of schools) always the best goal?

Hopefully this more complicated way of understanding about ILCs will not only generate new questions and dilemmas for both practitioners and researchers, but it will also challenge us all to model the best of transformational ILCs: to expose and explore our fundamental assumptions about ILCs; to resist easy, obvious answers; and to hold on to the ambiguity needed to dig deeper. Lots to do.
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