Professional Learning Communities and First-Year Composition Instructors.

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This study is situated within the field of writing teacher education and investigates the professional development of first-year composition instructors. The purpose of this study is to examine the flexibility of one K-12 teacher professionalization model, the professional learning community (PLC), for offering first-year composition instructors ongoing support and for promoting instructors’ pedagogical content knowledge growth.

This study builds upon scholarship within the field of rhetoric and composition to examine current trends in training graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) who teach first-year composition courses (Dobrin, 2005; Latterell, 1996; Pytlik & Liggett, 2002; Tremmel & Broz, 2002; Yancey, 2002). Such research indicates that current GTA training models may not offer novice instructors the regular, ongoing support needed for pedagogical growth. Additionally, this study draws upon knowledge of K-12 level teacher preparation methods (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Dewey, 1902/1983; DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Education scholars indicate the most effective models for promoting teachers’ pedagogical growth are continual, collaborative, and job-embedded. Finally, this study extends research into the concepts of “pedagogical content knowledge” and “reflective practice” as defined by Grossman (1990) and Schon (1983).
Specifically this study focuses on instructors’ participation in the PLC model. This study analyzes differences between the typical K-12 educational setting and this particular postsecondary setting, leading to substantial modifications of the model. Based on this particular setting, the PLC model was modified to allow instructors’ use of individualized, rather than standardized, assessments to monitor student achievement.

This study evidences the flexibility of the PLC as a professional development model. Further, by analyzing instructors’ individual pedagogical content knowledge growth, this study confirms that the modified PLC can be a useful means for promoting GTA professionalization. Each participant experienced substantial growth, either in expanding his/her understanding of pedagogical practices or in critically reflecting upon and developing his/her theoretical beliefs related to the teaching of writing. Finally, participants, both in their group interactions and in individual reflective writings, acknowledged increased confidence and greater investment in their teaching due to the collaborative PLC experience.
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iii
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS** .................................................................................................................. ii  
**LIST OF FIGURES** ...................................................................................................................... x  

## CHAPTER

### I. INTRODUCTION: THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION INSTRUCTORS ........................................ 1

- The Professional Learning Community: A Narrative .................................................. 1  
- The Professionalization of Graduate Teaching Assistants ........................................ 4
  
  - The professionalization gap ......................................................................................... 4
  
  - “Professional” instructor defined ................................................................................. 10
  
  - GTA education curricula overview ............................................................................. 13
  
  - Need for ongoing professionalization of GTAs ......................................................... 15

- Professionalization: A Call for Community ............................................................... 19
  
  - Community as the ideal ............................................................................................ 19
  
  - A potential solution: professional learning communities ....................................... 21

- Professional Learning Communities: Goals of this Study ....................................... 23

- Chapter Overviews ............................................................................................... 25

### II. METHODOLOGY .............................................................................................................. 27
Table of Contents - Continued

CHAPTER

Creating the First-Year Composition Professional Learning Community .................................................. 27

Defining the Professional Learning Community .......................................................... 28

Core Principles of a PLC ............................................................................................. 31

Ensuring that students learn ................................................................. 31

A culture of collaboration ........................................................................... 32

A focus on results ........................................................................................ 33

The Rationale and Significance of this PLC Study .............................................. 34

Research Questions .................................................................................................. 36

Sub-questions (for instructors) ........................................................................ 36

Sub-questions (for a WPA) .......................................................................... 36

Methodology .................................................................................................................. 37

Research design .......................................................................................................... 37

Context ......................................................................................................................... 40

Limitations ..................................................................................................................... 42

Participants .................................................................................................................... 42

First-Year Composition PLC: Core Principles for Data Collection .......................................................... 45

Ensuring that students learn .................................................................................. 46

A culture of collaboration ..................................................................................... 49

A focus on results ...................................................................................................... 50
CHAPTER

Data Analysis: Analyzing Collaboration, Instructors’ Professional Growth, and Student Achievement .......................... 51

III. A CULTURE OF COLLABORATION ................................................. 55

Defining “A Culture of Collaboration” ............................................. 55

The First-Year Composition PLC: Analyzing Culture of Collaboration Themes .................................................. 58

  Idea-sharing ........................................................................... 58

  Problem-solving .................................................................... 62

  Encouragement ..................................................................... 68

Individual Case Study on the Culture of Collaboration: Macey ...... 73

  Instructor’s background ......................................................... 73

  Teaching experiences prior to PLC participation ..................... 74

  Analyzing Macey’s experiences with the Culture of Collaboration ........................................................................ 76

IV. INSTRUCTORS’ PEDAGOGICAL CONTENT KNOWLEDGE GROWTH: A FOCUS ON RESULTS ...................................... 89

Defining “A Focus on Results” .................................................... 89

  A Focus on Results in the traditional PLC. .............................. 90

  A Focus on Results in this study’s PLC. ..................................... 92

  Instructor professional growth: A gap in the literature .......... 97

  A Focus on Results: Measuring professional growth ............ 99

Pedagogical Content Knowledge Defined ................................ 100

Instructors’ Pre-PLC Pedagogical Content Knowledge ............. 106
Table of Contents - Continued

CHAPTER

Macey’s teaching philosophy ......................................................... 106
Beth’s teaching philosophy .......................................................... 108
Ben’s teaching philosophy ........................................................... 109
Chris’ teaching philosophy .......................................................... 111
Pedagogical content knowledge and this PLC study ....................... 113
Pedagogical content knowledge and reflective practice ............... 115

Professional Learning Community: Evidence of Pedagogical
Content Knowledge Growth ....................................................... 116

Accountability and expanding instructional strategies:
Macey ................................................................. 118

Theoretical growth as a “trained” teacher: Beth ......................... 123

Reflection and better understanding students’ learning
needs: Ben ................................................................. 129

Accountability and confidence in pedagogical beliefs:
Chris ................................................................. 141

V. ENSURING STUDENTS LEARN: STUDENT ASSESSMENT
AND PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES ..................... 151

Defining the Ensuring Students Learn Principle ................. 151

Ensuring Students Learn within a Traditional PLC: An
Overview ................................................................. 152

Ensuring Students Learn with the First-Year Composition PLC:
An Overview ................................................................. 155

Ensuring Students Learn: Three Key Questions ..................... 157

Key question #1: What do we want each student to learn? ...... 157
Table of Contents - Continued

CHAPTER

Key question #2: How will we know when each student has learned it? ................................................................. 164

Key question #3: How will we respond when a student faces difficulty in learning? ............................................. 174

VI. IMPLICATIONS: WRITING TEACHER EDUCATION AND PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES ..................... 181

Writing Teacher Education: A Disciplinary Gap ......................... 181

Recommendations for Future PLC Use .................................. 184

Intentional time. .................................................................. 185

Teachers "buy-in." ............................................................... 187

Professional development occurs in different stages. .................. 188

Common knowledge base. .................................................... 189

Implications: Pedagogical Content Knowledge Growth .............. 191

Professionalization is a (long) process. ...................................... 192

Dispel the misconception that “anyone” can teach. ................. 194

Better understand how GTAs initially develop pedagogical content knowledge................................................. 195

Better understand how practicing teachers continue to develop pedagogical content knowledge......................... 196

Implications: The Modified PLC Model ................................. 198

Sub-question: What roles might a WPA play in administering this modified PLC model? .................... 198

Sub-question: What implications does this case study raise for resources needed to administer this PLC model? .... 203
Table of Contents - Continued

CHAPTER

Sub-question: What implications does this study raise for future research into this model? ........................................ 203

Concluding Thoughts on Writing Teacher Education and Professional Learning Communities .................................... 205

APPENDICES ...................................................................................................................................................... 208

A. “What is a Professional Learning Community?” Handout for PLC Group Members .................................................... 208

B. “Four Blocks for Building a Professional Learning Community” Handout for PLC Group Members ............................... 209

C. Instructor Reflection Questions #1: Pre-PLC Experiences/Philosophy for Teaching Composition ............................. 210

D. Instructor Reflection Questions #2: Problem-Solving Classroom Issues in First-Year Composition ............................. 211

E. Instructor Reflection Questions #3: Reflecting on the PLC as a Professional Development Model ............................. 212

F. First-Year Composition Student Learning Outcomes .................................................................................... 213

G. PLC Teaching Portfolio Requirements ............................................................................................................ 216

H. Chris’ Formative Assessment Protocol ........................................................................................................... 217

I. Chris’ Summative Assessment Protocol ........................................................................................................... 218

J. Approval Letter from the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board ............................................................... 219

WORKS CITED .................................................................................................................................................. 220

ix
LIST OF FIGURES

2.1 Comparisons of Traditional and Modified PLC Core Principles ............... 53
2.2 PLC Core Principles .................................................................................. 54
3.1 Culture of Collaboration Data Analysis ..................................................... 57
3.2 Macey’s Experiences with the Sub-Theme, Idea-Sharing ......................... 77
3.3 Macey’s Experiences with the Sub-Theme, Problem-Solving .................... 81
3.4 Macey’s Experiences with the Sub-Theme, Receiving Moral Support .......... 85
4.1 SMART Goals for this Study ..................................................................... 100
4.2 Four Interrelated Components of Pedagogical Content Knowledge ............. 101
4.3 Grossman’s Four Components of Pedagogical Content Knowledge .......... 117
4.4 Macey’s Pedagogical Content Knowledge ............................................... 123
4.5 Beth’s Pedagogical Content Knowledge .................................................. 129
4.6 Ben’s Genre Analysis Research Project Description ................................. 134
4.7 Ben’s Pedagogical Content Knowledge .................................................... 141
4.8 Chris’ Pedagogical Content Knowledge .................................................. 149
5.1 Ensuring Students Learn: Process Steps in an Ongoing Cycle .................. 154
5.2 Ensuring Students Learn Principle: Three Key Questions ........................ 156
5.3 A Contrast in K-12 and Postsecondary Educational Settings: Mission, Vision, Values .................................................. 162
5.4 PLC member’s Plan for Answering: What do we want each student to learn? .................................................................................. 164
5.5 A Contrast in K-12 and Postsecondary Educational Settings: Assessment ............................................................................. 167
5.6 PLC members’ Plan for Answering: How will we know when each student has learned it? .......................................................... 170

5.7 A Contrast in K-12 and Postsecondary Educational Settings: Support for Struggling Students.......................................................... 179
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION INSTRUCTORS

The Professional Learning Community: A Narrative

Afternoon sunlight streams through the windows of the humanities building on the university’s sprawling campus. As students walk to class and chat in the hallways, four first-year composition instructors sit around a conference table in a small corner room. Strewn across the table are lesson plans and rubrics, notebooks, and piles of student papers.

One instructor, Macey, asks the others to listen to the reflection questions she has created for her students. She admits, “It's against my instincts to do a formative assessment like this, but I wanted to see what my students thought about the genre of memoir before we began doing this creative nonfiction project.” Macey reads aloud her questions while the other three instructors listen. Chris thinks they sound good and asks Macey how the students reacted. Macey smiles, saying, “It was the best kind-of ‘pre-project’ experience that I’ve had because they had to write something down before they had to say anything out loud. Then we got into a really interesting conversation about who writes memoirs. I discovered a lot of the students don’t get why people write, like one student asked, ‘Why do people create art anyway?’” The other instructors laugh and Macey says, “It was a great conversation and a good way to start this project, but I’m not sure how I’ll assess them at the end.”
Chris hands out copies of a questionnaire she has created for her students' current project, wondering if Macey might be able to use this. Macey looks at the questionnaire and says, "This is a little more complicated than what I'm used to doing." Beth likes how this questionnaire focuses on student research. "After hearing you talk about how you teach students to research, I think I want to do this with my project too," she says. Ben remarks, "Yeah, this questionnaire is interesting, but I feel more comfortable giving my student open-ended questions, like Macey." He taps a pile of papers on the table in front of him: his students' free-writes from the first day of their new project. "These seem to give me a good idea of students' baseline understanding," Ben says, "but I don't know how to assess their knowledge at the end of the project."

For the next hour, the four instructors pass out rubrics and lesson plans; they reflect silently, read each others' work quietly, and share openly. As the sun lowers outside, the instructors begin packing their stacks of papers and lessons into their bags. Beth tells Chris that she's going to try her questionnaire approach when assessing her students next week. Macey says she'll keep working on her reflection questions and think about how she can create a summative assessment for her current project. Ben says, "I just remembered an idea that I forgot to write down, but that I've been thinking about since we last met." The group listens to Ben's idea for a new writing assignment and Macey says, "That would be a great experiment; now I want to steal your project." Ben laughs as the group begins to move toward the door. The instructors agree to keep in touch through email to decide their next meeting's
topic. As the door of the room closes, the four instructors walk down the hall, each
headed in a different direction until they meet again in two weeks.

Like the other forty students employed by this university to teach first-year
writing, these graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) must balance the role of teacher
(grading student work, teaching classes, planning lessons, conferencing with students)
with the role of student (attending classes, studying, participating in campus
organizations or departmental meetings, writing essays, meeting with
professors/advisors) with the role of scholar (writing articles, attending/presenting at
conferences, applying for research grants).

In addition to balancing this already demanding workload, these four GTAs
also voluntarily meet regularly to share instructional resources, collaborate on
common learning outcomes, and discuss first-year composition pedagogy. These
meetings are not meant to be social – a time for instructors to complain about
apathetic students or a broken printer in the computer lab. Instead, these meetings are
goal-oriented, focusing on questions such as, “What do we want our students to
learn?” and “How will we know when they’ve learned this?” Ben, Beth, Macey, and
Chris are not required to attend these meetings; they all participate out of a desire to
become better instructors by sharing questions, looking to one another for guidance,
offering up resources, and admitting when they need further help. They are volunteer
participants in a pilot study sponsored by their university; this study was founded to
fill an urgent need: the need to provide ongoing professional development to new,
inexperienced first-year composition instructors.
The Professionalization of Graduate Teaching Assistants

The professionalization gap.

Ben, Beth, Macey, and Chris were all hired by the university’s English department to do the same job: to teach a first-year composition course to undergraduate students. They are all full-time graduate students, pursuing Master’s degrees in literature or MFA degrees in creative writing. Though each of these four GTAs possesses a different educational background and is specializing in a different area of English studies, they share these common traits as new instructors: a lack of professional teacher training and a lack of knowledge in the subject they are teaching, composition studies.

Like the other forty students employed by this university to teach first-year writing, these GTAs enter their classrooms with little teaching knowledge, experiences, or training. For example, Macey and Ben, both in their second year as MFA students, possess bachelor’s degrees in creative writing. Both earned these degrees from liberal arts colleges; both admit to having not studied composition or education as an undergraduate student. Further, neither Macey nor Ben had any teaching experience prior to being hired as first-year composition instructors. These GTAs’ professional training consisted of a one-week orientation immediately preceding their first semester of teaching. During this initial semester, both instructors were enrolled in a practicum course in which they were introduced to composition theory and pedagogy. After completing this course, Macey and Ben
have continued to teach for the past three semesters without any formal professional development or composition coursework.

Macey and Ben’s situation is not unusual; historically, first-year composition instructors have often entered their classrooms with little educational preparation. For instance, Richard Fulkerson (2002) describes such GTA preparation (or lack thereof) as “mythic:”

New TAs, often fresh from an undergraduate literature curriculum in the previous spring, were given in the fall one or more textbooks (and maybe a syllabus), then shoved into a classroom full of unruly and more or less baffled first-year students, and told to teach them to write. The story’s mythic status shouldn’t detract from its essential truth…until around the 1970s, few graduate English students received much of any preparation for the classrooms they were put into – and in which they would spend their careers (p. xi).

Fulkerson is not the only scholar to identify the “mythic” lack of GTA educational preparation available for first-year composition instructors. From the turn of the twentieth century onward, composition scholars and English educators have called for improved methods for training GTAs (Alden, 1913; Allen, 1952; Dobrin, 2005; Gebhardt, 1997; Long, Holberg, & Taylor, 1996; Pytlik & Liggett, 2002; Tremmel & Broz, 2002; Yancey, 2002).

The preparation (or lack thereof) of first-year composition GTAs is clearly not a new issue. As far back as 1913, Alden advocated for better college teacher
preparation in his address to the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). Alden (1913) described the current method for employing composition GTAs as, “[W]hen it comes to finding a teacher, we generally look for the right kind of man [Alden’s italics], and are sure that defects in his training will take care of themselves in time” (p. 355). Though Alden’s report was published nearly one hundred years ago, the practices he describes still prevail nationwide at most postsecondary institutions. Many graduate teaching assistants lack foundational subject and pedagogical knowledge when entering their classrooms; further, many institutions offer minimal professional development to assist GTAs in “taking care” of any “defects in training” they may possess.

Currently, at many postsecondary institutions nationwide, there is a “gap” in the professional development offered to new first-year composition GTAs. As depicted in Macey and Ben’s narratives, most instructors experience a “gap” in professionalization after they have completed their initial orientation and practicum course. These instructors will continue to teach for several more semesters or years, many with little to no further instructional training. In fact, an increasing number of these GTAs may go on to teach composition as part of their careers. To assume, as Alden describes, that an instructor’s “defects” in training “will take care of themselves in time” is, to say the least, problematic (1913, p. 355). Many new GTAs, without the prerequisite educational knowledge, do not possess sufficient theoretical frameworks for sorting ideas, experiences, and theories on teaching writing. Left
unsupported, these instructors cannot realistically “take care of themselves” as professionals.

In fact, even those GTAs with educational expertise and experience in the teaching of writing may still struggle without adequate professional support. Two such instructors with education backgrounds are portrayed in the opening narrative, Beth and Chris. Beth is certified to teach English at the secondary level and has had one semester of teaching experience prior to her enrollment as a GTA. She is a first-year graduate student, specializing in literature. Like her colleagues, Beth underwent the initial orientation workshop and practicum course; now she is in her second semester of teaching with no formal professional development or institutional support. Similar to Beth, Chris began her assistantship with prior educational experience, having taught at the elementary and middle-school-levels. Like Beth, she is also a first-year GTA, specializing in literature, and in her second semester of teaching. Both Beth and Chris cite their previous instructional training as helpful in designing their syllabi, course projects, and daily lessons. However, their previous training is not to suggest that prior K-12 educational experience alone adequately prepares GTAs for the pedagogical content of a postsecondary first-year composition classroom.

Too often, instructors such as Beth and Chris are left to teach with minimal support, hired under the assumption that specific knowledge in one English content area (i.e. literature, creative writing, or secondary-level language arts) signifies an ability to teach another English content area (i.e. composition). Allen (1952)
addresses such assumptions in his report on the preparation of composition instructors delivered to the Conference on College Composition and Communication. Here, Allen discloses two assumptions prevalent in graduate English programs, the first being a GTA specializing in the study of literature is “...ipso facto, a teacher of literature,” despite a lack of professional preparation or coursework in literature pedagogy (1952, p. 4). The second assumption, then, is that the literature instructor is automatically equipped to teach composition, though no professional development or training is provided in this subject area (Allen, 1952, p. 4).

Allen sums up these assumptions as, “A good scholar is a good teacher. You don’t have to train him to be one” (1952, p. 4). One might argue that another, more important, assumption concerning the teaching of writing is evident in these statements though not specifically articulated by Allen. By assuming a “good scholar” of literature is inherently able to teach both literature and composition, one implies that anyone can teach writing; no specific content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, or practical training is needed to become a first-year composition instructor. Obviously, such assumptions not only undermine the disciplinary status of composition studies and the value of composition pedagogy. These assumptions also deny the professional status of composition instructors and their need for ongoing training.

Allen is not the only composition scholar concerned with the lack subject knowledge new GTAs teaching first-year composition possess. The Boyer Commission’s Report “Reinventing Undergraduate Education: A Blueprint for
America's Research Universities” (1998), acknowledges the dangers of offering inadequate preparation to new instructors, stating, “...too many [universities] plunge them [GTAs] directly into their duties. This situation can be most harmful when they begin teaching immediately, sometimes in fields that may well not be their specialty (for example, literature major teaching composition or foreign language courses)” (p. 1).

At most postsecondary institutions, new GTAs begin their first semester of teaching with little content knowledge of composition studies, few (if any) educational experiences, and limited training supplied by their hiring institution. Further, these instructors often continue to teach for semesters, if not years, with a lack of ongoing, sustainable professional development. The professionalization (or lack thereof) of first-year composition GTAs is not a new phenomenon. For the past one hundred years, this issue has been widely acknowledged by composition scholars, writing program administrators (WPAs), and English educators. Yancey (2002) describes this phenomenon by noting the irony of composition studies as a disciple, calling it

...a discipline that has ardently served the needs of one population while attending little to another. More specifically, we’ve focused on how to teach students to write, while thinking very little, at least systematically, about the kinds of assistance we might offer the graduate students – the so-called TAs, the teaching assistants who by any other name are instructors who teach a
considerable number of the first-year composition courses offered in this
country (p. 63).

Yancey does not infer that "good models of TA development" are non-existent (2002, p. 63). In fact, many scholars would argue that in the past thirty years, English departments have given increasing attention to GTA educational preparation (Dobrin, 2005; Long et al., 1996; Pytlik & Liggett, 2002; Tremmel & Broz, 2002). Despite this increased attention, no common model for professional development currently exists; that is, each individual institution has its own programmatic design for GTA development, and at many institutions little, if any resources are allocated to these programs.

Considering that each institution has its own particular training needs, Yancey and other composition scholars, Writing Program Administrators (WPAs), and English educators do not suggest a common, generalized model of GTA development is pragmatic or beneficial. However, it is crucial for composition studies to develop a common understanding of what it means to "professionalize" GTAs and identify key elements within this "professionalization" process in order for each local institution to provide the pedagogical support these new instructors need to succeed in their classrooms.

"Professional" instructor defined.

Both The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and The Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) offer position statements outlining guidelines for the preparation of college-level English
instructors. NCTE (1973) calls for “improved quality” in preparing graduate students to teach at the postsecondary level by encouraging English departments “…to accept the responsibility of providing education in basic pedagogical skills through formal programs, internships, and other comparable experiences” (National Council of Teachers of English). CCCC (1989) offers a similar recommendation by asserting: “Each institution should provide adequate training and supervision of graduate writing instructors…” (Conference on College Composition and Communication). According to these statements, both organizations recognize the need for English departments to prepare new GTAs for their teaching responsibilities. However, neither of these statements clearly defines what it means for GTAs to be considered “professional” instructors. Further, no process for “professionalization” of these instructors is offered. The lack of a clear professionalization process directly affects the type and quality of GTA training programs at FYW programs nationwide.

WPAs might be able to look to K-12 teacher education for some models, particularly in the ways they define professionalization in teaching. Contrasted to the vague descriptions of the “professional” instructor and the process of “teacher professionalization” at the postsecondary level are the following recommendations for educator preparation and development supported by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), the accrediting body for K-12 level instructors. NCATE (1997) lists three phases instructors must complete to become a “professional teacher.” First, they must attend an accredited school of education in order to “gain a foundation of knowledge about teaching and learning as well as
opportunities to practice teaching...under supervision” (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 1997). Second, novice instructors must teach for a designated time within a tiered licensing system, in which they are required to participate in mentoring and/or professional development (NCATE, 1997). Finally, the “professional” teacher is designated as one who has received advanced certification and participates in ongoing professional development (NCATE, 1997).

Within this K-12 professionalization model, individual states, school districts, and institutions determine the amount of professional development a teacher must receive as well as the time frame for completing such requirements. While these specific requirements may vary slightly, the definition of the “professional” instructor and overall process of professionalization remain the same across subject areas, grade levels, and geographic locations. That is, a “professional” K-12 instructor understands necessary content-level and pedagogical knowledge, possesses years of teaching experience and training, and continues to participate in ongoing professional development.

Unlike the K-12 level, no common definition exists for the postsecondary “professional” instructor. Further, among postsecondary institutions nationwide, no universal model for professionalizing such instructors currently exists. Within first-year composition programs, many universities prepare novice GTAs for their first classroom experiences using a similar model: an introductory orientation and a practicum course in teaching composition. However, within the field of composition studies, there is still a lack of understanding concerning what it means to be a
“professional” instructor and how one advances from novice to professional status.

**GTA education curricula overview.**

Although no common GTA professionalization model currently exists, it is evident that many institutions share similar key elements within their training programs. Latterell (1996) notes the following elements as common to most GTA education programs: an introductory orientation, a practicum or methods course, and some form of on-going mentoring (p.10). Thirty-two of the thirty-six institutions surveyed report requiring a fall orientation for new TAs, varying in duration from one day to one week (Latterell, 1996, p. 10). For many institutions, this orientation is not simply an introduction to university and departmental policies or an overview of syllabus design and classroom management; rather, the orientation serves as a gateway into the practicum or methods course which follows.

Of the three programmatic elements identified by Latterell, then, the one in which many universities locate their teacher preparation is the single methods course or practicum (Latterell, 1996). In fact, for 23 of the 36 programs represented in Latterell’s study, this single course constitutes the entirety of GTA teacher preparation (Latterell, 1996, p. 10). Due to the significant roles it plays in providing new teaching assistants with necessary theoretical frameworks and practical methods, the composition practicum is the source of much scholarship, research, and debate among composition scholars, writing teacher educators, and writing program administrators (Dobrin, 2005; Gebhardt, 1997; Pytlik & Liggett, 2002; Tremmel & Broz, 2002).
In particular, these scholars and administrators analyze the practicum’s role as a how-to writing methods course (Gebhardt, 1997; Tremmel & Broz, 2002). They also consider the practicum’s role as a gate-keeper for the disciplinary status of rhetoric and composition within the field of English studies. Dobrin describes the practicum as a means “for controlling how and in what ways the very discipline of composition studies is perpetuated” (2005, p. 4). The practicum, therefore, is viewed as a vital course both for professionalizing GTAs as writing instructors and for introducing these students to the discipline of writing studies. In fact, this course might be compared to the first phase K-12 instructors must undergo in the NCATE (1997) teacher professionalization model. This phase requires pre-service teachers to learn necessary content-level and pedagogical knowledge as well as practice implementing such knowledge under supervision. According to composition scholars, WPAs, and English educators, novice instructors of first-year composition learn content-level and pedagogical knowledge in the practicum course. At most institutions, this course introduces new GTAs to the discipline of composition studies as well as pedagogies for teaching this subject. Further, many GTAs enroll in this course during their first semester as instructors; their teaching is then supervised by either a WPA or a mentor instructor.

The practicum course, then, plays multiple roles in providing disciplinary knowledge and practical pedagogical support to new GTAs. Perhaps, however, the practicum plays too many roles. Many WPAs and composition scholars agree the practicum, due to its fractured focus, is limited in its effectiveness for
"professionalizing" GTAs as college instructors. Dobrin poses the question, "Can any one course...possibly hope to present a survey of pertinent contemporary theories about what it means to make a text, a survey of theories about how students bight best be taught to write, and a survey of the best teaching practices within a local context?" (2005, p. 41). Obviously, Dobrin and other composition scholars maintain that it is unrealistic to assume one course can achieve these multiple goals. Further, the very fact that the single practicum course serves such far-reaching purposes emphasizes its ineffectual role as an instructor professionalization model. Dobrin (2005) explains,

As a primary component in teacher professionalization, the practicum serves multiple ends, many of which are in no way central to providing teaching methodologies to new teachers of writing per se, but rather are more broadly conceived in terms of overall professionalization of graduate students and introduction to composition studies (p. 19).

M. Marshall (2004) shares Dobrin's belief that the practicum alone is not an effective means for professionalizing GTAs. She contends, "...a single seminar cannot begin to provide the intellectual foundation necessary for making fully informed curricular or pedagogical choices required of those who would purport to be 'professional' teachers at the university level" (Marshall, M., 2004, p. 89). The practicum, then, may be one means for providing GTAs an introduction to composition studies, pedagogies, and theories; however, this course merely represents the initial phase needed for instructor professionalization. As represented in the K-12 educational model, a teacher is not "made" in a single experience. Teachers, and
first-year composition instructors are no exception, and thus need continued support beyond their initial induction.

**Need for ongoing professionalization of GTAs.**

What many scholars spend relatively little time examining is another equally important component to the professionalization of GTAs: post-practicum ongoing professional development. Currently, no universal model for such professional development exists among institutions with first-year composition programs. Lack of post-practicum support for increasing new instructors’ professional knowledge and practices represents significant implications for the quality of teaching in composition programs and the development of effective long-term teaching practices. WPAs, English educators, and composition scholars agree that the practicum alone is simply not sufficient for providing effective, long-term training for new instructors. In what ways, then, is this gap in professionalization currently being addressed?

Barr Ebest (2002) cites mentoring as one method for providing GTAs with additional professional training. She describes three general types of mentoring relationships in which the WPA, faculty/adjunct faculty, or GTA peers serve as mentors. In the first two mentoring relationships, Barr Ebest (2002) believes WPAs and faculty members can serve as “strong role models” by helping students conduct research and by sharing lessons, “technical know-how,” and “practical advice” (p.215, 216). However, this type of professional development requires much time of the WPAs and faculty members serving as mentors. Given the number of GTAs in need of mentoring and the limited time of WPAs, it not feasible for a single instructor
to offer the professional development needed. Further, faculty members with heavy teaching and/or research loads may not have the time to take on the “extra” responsibility of mentoring.

Of the three mentoring relationships described by Barr Ebest, the third one seems most feasible. In this relationship, GTAs participate in peer mentoring with more experienced instructors assigned to assist novice instructors. Purdue University currently fosters such mentoring relationships among its first-year composition instructors. S. Rose (2002) considers the first-year composition mentoring program established at Purdue University as “…the standard model from which other programs have diverged to a greater or lesser degree…” (p. 91). Within this model, the mentors are appointed by the WPA and are usually either professorial-rank faculty specialists in rhetoric and composition or GTAs who are advanced students in rhetoric and composition programs (S. Rose, 2002, p. 88). These mentors are assigned a small group of incoming GTAs during the fall semester orientation; the mentor groups then meet throughout the practicum to discuss composition theory, pedagogical approaches, and classroom management issues. Finally, the mentors work closely with the WPA to ensure programmatic goals are being met.

The peer mentoring program at Purdue is designed to benefit both the GTAs and the WPA. Weiser (2002) notes, “…peer mentoring provides TAs with valuable professional development opportunities. TAs who serve as mentors can apply their disciplinary knowledge and teaching experience in a way that is quite different from simply teaching their own classes” (p. 46). In other words, GTA mentors are given
the opportunity to participate in the professionalization process. Rather than a hierarchy in which the WPA or faculty members solely embody “professional” expertise and status, this model recognizes the disciplinary and pedagogical knowledge these GTA mentors possess. In fact, Weiser (2002) maintains that because these GTAs are “…more familiar with the scholarship and more recently experienced in the pedagogy of composition than the majority of our non-rhetoric and composition faculty,” this model is “a more professional mentoring program” than one in which faculty members outside the field are designated as mentors (p. 46).

GTAs who serve as mentors in this program benefit from participating in the professional development of their peers; further, the WPA in this model also reaps benefits. The WPA is relieved of the time-consuming roles of daily training, observing, and evaluating new composition instructors. By regularly meeting with the peer mentors performing these duties, the WPA is able to ensure program continuity. Although this model effectively offers ongoing professional development to first-year composition instructors at Purdue, it may not be feasible for all universities, particularly ones without a cadre of rhetoric and composition graduate students to serve as peer mentors. Further, not all graduate students specializing in composition studies may want to participate as mentors. Composition studies, after all, is a broad field encompassing many areas of research, such as new media, cultural rhetoric, and digital literacy. Therefore, graduate students studying one of these fields may not possess expertise in composition pedagogy; similarly, such GTAs may not wish to assist in writing program administration.
What is needed, then, is a flexible professional development model, which can be adapted to meet a local institution’s training needs. I suggest that we look to our colleagues in K-12 teacher professional development for guidance in providing ongoing, long-term pedagogical support for first-year composition instructors.

Professionalization: A Call for Community

Many composition scholars, English educators, and WPAs agree novice first-year composition instructors need sufficient training and support. Recently, such scholars have suggested that creating a “community” among first-year composition GTAs is one possible means for supporting new instructors (Dobrin, 2002; Latterell, 1996; Long et al., 1996). For example, Latterell (1996) names the “ideal teaching communities” as ones which

...introduce first-year teachers to their writing pedagogy from multiple perspectives. They combat the damaging notion that teaching is an isolated activity – a private act between students and teacher occurring behind closed doors – by promoting community-building activities among new GTAs, advanced GTAs, instructors, and tenure-track faculty...These programs cultivate teaching communities in which first-year GTAs are immersed in multiple forums and conversations about teaching (p. 21).

Community as the ideal.

Here, Latterell outlines the “ideal” teaching community, admitting “...developing such an extensive GTA education curriculum may not be possible in many programs” (1996, p. 21). Latterell is not alone in envisioning “community” as
the ideal model for preparing and sustaining new GTAs in their roles as educators. In “Reinventing Undergraduate Education: A Blueprint for America’s Research Universities,” The Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University recognizes the seemingly lack of community currently present in many GTA education programs. The report states, “Some universities are giving greater emphasis to teaching techniques as part of graduate student education, but few have explored mentoring relationships or the synergy of these interactions” (The Boyer Commission, 1998).

Similarly, Long et al. (1996) recommend first-year composition programs decentralize the WPA’s role by forming what they term a “collegial” model. They propose that “…as graduate students gain teaching experience and develop a theoretical competency by engaging with the scholarship in the field…” the WPA then “…is to create a collaborative administrative structure and thereby give students an opportunity to learn the practices of composition studies by actually finding themselves in a position to shape those practices” (Long et al., 1996, p. 67). Within this model, WPA and GTAs would share administrative responsibilities; further, GTAs would mentor and provide professional development for one another. In other words, GTAs would “…develop a responsive and collaborative community of teachers” (Long et al., 1996, p. 74).

Theoretically, the type of community proposed by Long and other scholars seems an effective means for offering ongoing support and professional development to first-year composition instructors. However, current models for creating
community among instructors lack specificity. Further, these models do not take into account the fact that these GTAs are not trained as teachers, as composition scholars, or as program administrators. In reality, GTAs do not possess the content-area, pedagogical, and administrative knowledge to create effective teaching communities without some type of leadership and direction. How, then, might such a collaborative community be realized in an actual composition program?

A potential solution: professional learning communities.

At the K-12 educational level, one type of professional development which has gained recognition nationwide as an effective model is the Professional Learning Community (PLC) (Dufour & Eaker, 2008). Simply put, a PLC involves teachers meeting regularly to decide what specific goals/outcomes students should learn, how to best teach this material, how to assess if the students have learned the desired material, and how to readjust lessons, goals and assessments based on student performance (Dufour, Dufour, & Eaker, 2005). Within the K-12 educational context, PLCs may be constructed within an entire school, within grade levels, or within an academic discipline. Thus, this model appears flexible enough to be adapted to any educational setting.

The key component of this model, which educational leadership scholars attribute to its success, is teacher collaboration. Eastwood and Louis (1992) emphasize that "the single most important factor" for successful institution improvement and "the first order of business" for enhancing the effectiveness of their school is the creation of a collaborative environment (p. 215). DuFour and Eaker
(1998), founders of the PLC model, describe such a collaborative community as one in which instructors do the following.

...teachers participate in reflective dialogue; observe and react to one another's teaching; jointly develop curriculum and assessment practices; work together to implement new programs and strategies; share lesson plans and materials; and collectively engage in problem solving, action research, and continuous improvement practices (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 117-118).

Such collaboration yields multiple benefits for the instructors taking part in the PLC. First, instructors may further their knowledge of composition pedagogies by working in a PLC. One requirement of this model is that members meet regularly and share common lessons and assignments. Exposure to other instructors' methods and ideas may help instructors question their own teaching practices, inspire them to try colleagues' methods, and increase the ways in which they approach the teaching of composition. DuFour and Eaker (1998) cite such collaboration as necessary for teachers to "expand their level of expertise by allowing them to hear the ideas of others" and "to reduce the fear of risk taking by providing encouragement and moral support" (p. 117). This model, then, offers instructors opportunities to share new ideas as well as the support for testing them out, thus increasing the chances for new pedagogies to be learned and implemented.

Another benefit of the PLC is its focus on student achievement. That is, instructors are asked to focus not on what they are teaching, but on what students are learning. To determine what and how students learn, instructors engage in action
research. By creating common assessments within a PLC group, members can track whether students are learning the goals. The PLC requires continual assessment and adjustments to teaching; it requires a complex, critical view of pedagogy. This model expects instructors to continually change lessons, goals, and assessments based on students' needs. Therefore, instructors are not "finished products" but "students of teaching" and "consumers of research" (Dufour and Eaker, 1998). The PLC is a flexible professional development model that changes as teachers mature in their content area knowledge and as research demonstrates new, effective methods for instruction. In other words, the PLC can be used long-term for a group of instructors, such as those working for several semesters within a postsecondary English department.

Further, this model may better fill the "professionalization gap" experienced by many first-year composition instructors due to its focus on peer collaboration. In this model, instructors themselves invest in their own development, relieving already-burdened WPAs of providing mentoring and relieving universities of the expense connected with hiring speakers/scholars to supply professional development. The PLC, then, seems one possible means for providing instructors long-term support in the postsecondary environment.

**Professional Learning Communities: Goals of this Study**

This study examines how implementing a PLC on a small scale can provide insights in filling the professionalization gap many first-year composition GTAs currently face. As indicated, one benefit of the PLC is its flexibility in adapting to
various educational contexts. This study will examine how the foundational principles of this model remain intact as the model’s structure is adjusted to better fit this particular postsecondary setting. Structural elements examined in this study include: PLC meeting agendas, PLC meeting discussions, shared educational documents (i.e. lesson plans, rubrics, etc.), relationships among instructor participants, and the relationship of administrator to PLC instructors.

In this study, I will also discuss how the model meets and/or does not meet the professional development needs of the participating instructors. Assessment of the model will be examined through participants’ formative and summative reflections on the model as well as through individual interviews. Further, each instructor will create a teaching portfolio of a focus project. These portfolios will indicate how and in what ways instructors perceive the PLC experience affecting their beliefs and methods for teaching first-year composition.

This study may be useful for WPAs who are not currently implementing ongoing professional development within their first-year teacher training programs. In particular, WPAs who are interested in supporting instructor collaboration may find this study helpful in designing a peer mentoring program. Further, WPAs who do not have the support of assistants or rhetoric/composition doctoral students to serve as peer mentors might use this study to design a professional development model with their current cohort of teaching assistants.

Most importantly, this study is not simply focused on the practical implementation of one particular model. Rather, this study offers theoretical rationale
for providing first-year composition instructors with long-term, ongoing professional development. This rationale is developed through an examination of factors contributing to GTAs’ current lack of pedagogical content knowledge and an examination of current research within the fields of teacher education and English education on how practicing teachers develop such pedagogical knowledge. In short, this study may prove a valuable means for considering what it means to “professionalize” first-year composition instructors and for considering how the discipline of writing teacher education, as an intersection of composition studies and English education, might promote the professional development of writing teachers across grade levels and content areas.

Chapter Overviews

Chapter Two provides a literature review describing the traditional, K-12 PLC model. This chapter also describes the methodology used in this study, including descriptions of the study’s postsecondary educational setting, descriptions of instructor-participants, descriptions of the researcher’s role, and methods for data collection. This chapter ends with an overview of the traditional PLC model’s three core principles: Ensuring Students Learn, Culture of Collaboration, and Focus on Results. These three principles are used as a theoretical framework for analyzing collected data; further these principles are the focus of this study’s remaining chapters.

Chapter Three provides a detailed analysis of the Culture of Collaboration principle. This chapter investigates three sub-themes that emerged in participants’
PLC meetings and reflective statements. These *Culture of Collaboration* sub-themes include: idea-sharing, problem-solving, and encouragement. Finally, Chapter Three ends with an individual case study of one instructor, Macey, and her particular experience with this principle.

Chapter Four analyzes the *Focus on Results* principle. This chapter investigates how instructors’ pedagogical content knowledge was affected by participating in this first-year composition PLC. The chapter provides a detailed explanation of the concept of “pedagogical content knowledge.” Individual case studies of all four instructors are provided, describing how each instructor experienced professional growth.

Chapter Five focuses on the third core principle, *Ensuring Students Learn*. This chapter investigates instructors’ beliefs and practices concerning student assessment. Also included in this chapter is an in-depth analysis of differences between the typical K-12 setting and this particular postsecondary educational setting. This chapter examines how differences these settings may impact instructors’ strategies for assessing student learning.

Chapter Six offers implications for writing teaching educators (English educators, teachers, K-12 administrators, WPAs, and composition scholars) on future research. This chapter provides implications for further theoretical research into how K-12 and postsecondary writing teachers initially develop and continue to develop pedagogical content knowledge. This chapter also provides implications for further modifications of the PLC as a professional development models in various settings.
CHAPTER II

METHODOLOGY

Creating the First-Year Composition Professional Learning Community

To create a professional learning community, focus on learning rather than teaching, work collaboratively, and hold yourself accountable for results. (DuFour, 2004, p.6)

According to Richard DuFour, co-founder of the PLC model I use in this study, American public schools are currently in the process of a reform movement. This movement replaces hierarchical top-down management with collaboration, providing teachers with a key role in determining a school’s mission, vision and values; discovering best practices for teaching; engaging in action research to assess student learning; and sharing research results to ensure continued innovation (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, pgs. 25-29). The term “learning community” first appeared among education scholars in the 1960s and has been used in various contexts and situations since that time (All things PLC).

However, a “true” professional learning community, as defined by DuFour and Eaker, is much more than a simple term. DuFour, along with other education scholars, insist that the term PLC cannot simply be applied to any educational situation, such as a group of grade-level teachers, an entire district interested in collaboration, or a national professional organization (2004, p. 6). The success of the PLC model relies on the willingness of administrators, teachers, and students to work as co-creators and co-facilitators of a new educational structure. In this structure, administrators must allow teachers time for collaboration and authority to redesign
curricula. Teachers, then, must willingly share classroom materials and evidence of student learning with their colleagues. In short, a Professional Learning Community is a distinct model based on the following characteristics.

**Defining the Professional Learning Community**

The PLC is an organizational model best described by the following six characteristics created by DuFour and Eaker.

1. Share mission, vision, and values.
2. Collective inquiry.
3. Collaborative teams.
4. Action orientation and experimentation.
5. Continuous improvement.

By quickly examining these six characteristics, it is possible to see how this model differs from the top-down hierarchy prevalent in most institutions throughout the 19th and 20th centuries.

First, a PLC differs from many typical educational institutions in that all members of the school form a “collective commitment” to the “mission, vision, and values” of their institution (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 25). The mission, vision, and values of the school are not created by administrators, but are developed within the entire school body; these guiding principles then become the focus of instructors’ curricula, teaching practices, and collaborative meetings.
The mission, vision, and values of a school are not static, but change to fit the needs of the students. In order to determine what changes are needed, instructors must engage in collective inquiry. As DuFour and Eaker (1998) explain, “People in such a community are relentless in questioning the status quo, seeking new methods, testing those methods, and then reflecting on the results” (p. 25). Instructors share the results of their inquiry with their colleagues, meeting regularly in collaborative teams. These teams share pedagogical resources and focus on action. Team meetings are not meant to serve as complaint sessions or social engagements; rather, instructors must be willing to conduct research within their classrooms and share the results of their research with their colleagues.

The PLC is not simply a casual meeting among teachers; it is much more than a support group. At Adalai E. Stevenson High School, Superintendent Eric Twadell (2008) describes the PLC as “‘teachers working smarter by working together’” (Honawar, p. 1). At Stevenson, one of the first institutions in the nation to implement PLCs, each of the school’s 300 teachers meets weekly in course-specific or interdisciplinary teams. Within the PLC teams, teachers conduct research on methods for teaching specific content-area knowledge or skill-sets specific to their student population’s educational needs. As teachers research their students’ learning needs, they brainstorm lesson plans, craft assessments, analyze student learning, and share results of student learning with colleagues both within and outside their PLC team. The PLC, then, is much more than a support group; it is a collaborative structure,
which supports teachers' investigation of effective teaching practices within their classrooms.

Finally, instructors within a PLC must strive for continued improvement. "A commitment to continuous improvement is evident in an environment in which innovation and experimentation are viewed not as tasks to accomplish or projects to complete, but as ways of conducting day-to-day business, forever" (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 28). That is, members of a PLC do not test out new methods for teaching for once and for all; they continue to form pedagogical hypotheses, collect data assessing their students' learning, and use this data along with team members' collaborative support to determine even more educational improvements to make.

What is evident in the PLC model is that instructors play a crucial, active role in determining an institution's educational goals and daily classroom practices. Administrators do not issue curricular mandates, but work alongside instructors to determine instructional goals based on actual classroom research. Within this model, theoretically, administrators and teachers collaborate as equals to determine student learning outcomes and assess student learning. In reality, this type of collaboration does not happen spontaneously; instead, collaboration is carefully structured to meet a specific focus. The PLC's collaborative structure also requires accountability among participants to succeed. DuFour and Eaker (1998) offer the following three core principles for educators interested in creating a focused, structured PLC.
Core Principles of a PLC

Ensuring that students learn.

The focus of traditional schools is teaching; the focus of the professional learning community is student learning. The difference is much more than semantics. It represents a fundamental shift in the teacher-student relationship (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 216).

Traditionally, teachers have been asked to report (to administrators, parents, etc.) what they have “taught” within their classrooms. In this model, teachers are held accountable for the amount of curriculum taught or the number of lessons “covered”; success is measured simply according to student test scores or grades. The PLC model, however, asks teachers to focus specifically on what students are (or are not) learning. Rather than simply “covering” curriculum, teachers in a PLC decide what each student should learn, how to determine if a student has learned this outcome, and how to respond if learning has not occurred (DuFour, 2004, p. 8).

This principle has several ramifications. First, teachers must differentiate instruction based on varying students’ needs. That is, teachers cannot follow a prescribed pacing guide; rather, they must adjust lessons and assessments to accommodate those students who move slower (or faster) than the “normal” learning pace. By working in a collaborative team, teachers can design strategies for allowing extra support for those students who are struggling or those who need to be challenged. As a result, student learning is monitored closely and personally. A student’s success or failure is not measured by his/her ability to “keep up” with the
class pace or pass a standardized test. Instead, each student must evidence learning based on timely, appropriate assessments designed by the classroom teacher.

A culture of collaboration.

Educators who are building a professional learning community recognize that they must work together to achieve their collective purpose of learning for all (DuFour, 2004, p. 9). Obviously, one individual teacher (or administrator, legislator, scholar) cannot effectively determine the essential student learning outcomes for an entire grade level, content area, or district. It takes a team of individuals actively involved in student learning to develop appropriate outcomes, to test out methodologies, to assess student achievement, and to share classroom results. In other words, ensuring students learn requires collaboration. This model refutes the traditional top-down hierarchy, in which administrators, rather than teachers, choose curricula and assign standardized assessments. Instead, teachers’ disciplinary and pedagogical content knowledge are valued. Teachers reflect upon their own classroom practices and collaborate with colleagues on best practices for teaching. PLC teams work together to devise assessments, monitor student learning, and report their findings.

Such collaboration requires both teachers and administrators to be transparent. First, teachers must be willing to share their teaching “successes” as well as instances when learning, for whatever reason, does not occur. Teams must be supportive, with colleagues willing to share material resources and classroom strategies. Teams must also be willing to base their curricular, pedagogical, and assessment decisions on
actual classroom research. That is, teachers cannot rely solely on national or district standards or theoretical texts to design course content. They must also collaborate with students, making curricula appropriate to their learning needs and interests. Finally, administrators in a PLC must participate as co-creators, co-collaborators, and co-problem-solvers alongside teachers. DuFour and Eaker (1998) describe the administrator as sharing decision making with teachers; further, “this task demands less command and control and more learning and leading, less dictating and more orchestrating” (p. 184). In short, a successful PLC involves open collaboration among teachers, students, and administrators to achieve the collective purpose of learning for all.

A focus on results.

Professional learning communities judge their effectiveness on the basis of results...Every teacher team participates in an ongoing process of identifying the current level of student achievement, establishing a goal to improve the current level, working together to achieve that goal, and providing periodic evidence of progress (DuFour, 2004, p. 10).

Inherent to PLC members is dissatisfaction with the status quo. Learning does not take place for once and for all; rather, as students’ learning needs continually change, so must the goals of a PLC and the methods for teaching those goals. DuFour and Eaker (1998) compare this commitment to continuous school improvement to one’s eating habits. They explain, “Becoming a learning community is less like getting in shape than staying in shape – it is not a fad diet, but a never-ending commitment to an
essential, vital way of life” (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 28). Members of a PLC, then, do not meet to report on daily lesson plans, complain about a difficult parent, or bemoan student discipline problems. Truly committed PLC teachers collect classroom data to evidence student learning and share these results with colleagues, parents, students, and administrators.

This model is not designed to “punish” or “embarrass” teachers whose students have low test scores or poor grades. Rather, DuFour views this focus on results as vital to ensuring student learning. He considers a PLC successful when members “…honestly confront data on student achievement and…work together to improve results rather than make excuses” (DuFour, 2004, p. 11). Reporting assessment results, then, becomes an opportunity for teams to celebrate best practices, to replicate members’ successful methods, and to identify necessary curricular changes.

The Rationale and Significance of this PLC Study

As no research has yet to be conducted on examining the PLC within a postsecondary first-year composition program, this study will be useful for administrators and English educators to determine this professional development model’s adaptability for offering instructors ongoing professionalization. Specifically, this study will examine ways in which the PLC might be adapted from the K-12 model to a postsecondary one. It will also offer insight how the model does (or does not) affect instructors’ pedagogical beliefs and practices.
This study will be useful for writing program administrators (WPAs) who are interested in implementing ongoing professional development within their first-year teacher-training program. In particular, WPAs who are interested in supporting instructor collaboration may find the implications of this study helpful in designing long-term professional development models. Further, WPAs who do not have the support of assistants or rhetoric and composition doctoral students to serve as mentors might use this study to design a professional development model with their current cohort of teaching assistants.

This study, however, is not solely designed with WPAs or composition scholars in mind. This study draws upon scholarship from the fields of English education and teacher education to define the ways in which novice instructors initially gain and continually develop pedagogical knowledge. In particular, this study investigates participating instructors’ pedagogical content knowledge, or the specific theoretical and practical knowledge a teacher acquires for teaching a particular content area. This study extends research in pedagogical content knowledge conducted by Grossman (1990), Grossman & Richert (1988), Howey & Grossman (1989), and Shulman (2004). Therefore, the findings of this study might also be useful to K-12 scholars, practitioners, and administrators interested in supporting the professional development of writing teachers.

This study, then, is situated within the intersection of two academic fields, English education and rhetoric and composition. Specifically, this study is situated in the discipline of writing teacher education, a discipline invested in preparing and
support K-12 and postsecondary teachers of writing, across grade levels and disciplines. The goal overall goal of this study is to look at one professional development model from the K-12 educational setting and investigate its feasibility for providing postsecondary writing teachers with ongoing support. In particular, this study investigates how this model attributes to participating instructors’ professional pedagogical growth. With these goals in mind, I developed the following key research questions for this study.

**Research Questions**

1. In what ways does the PLC need to be modified from the “traditional” K-12 model to “work” in a post-secondary composition program?

2. In what ways does working within the PLC model affect participants’ competence in the teaching of first-year composition?

   **Sub-questions (for instructors).**
   a) How do instructors perceive their competence and confidence in teaching first-year composition prior to experiencing the PLC?
   b) To what extent can the PLC develop instructors’ pedagogical content knowledge?
   c) How do instructors describe the experience of working in the PLC?
   d) How do instructors perceive their confidence and expertise in pedagogical content knowledge after experiencing the PLC?

   **Sub-questions (for a WPA).**
   a) What role(s) might a WPA play in administering this PLC model?
   b) What implications does this case study raise for resources needed to administer this PLC model?
   c) What implications does this study raise for future research into this model?
Methodology

Research design.

At the K-12 level, the PLC is traditionally structured school-wide, with collaborative teams usually meeting according to content-areas or grade-levels. These teams meet regularly throughout the academic school year for specific purposes (i.e. to assess students’ research writing skills, to design a new science curriculum, etc.). Instructors within each team are expected to share lesson plans and materials, collaboratively design curriculum and assessments, and collectively engage in action research (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 117).

Similar to this “traditional” model used within the K-12 educational setting, the PLC used in this study involves instructors of the same first-year composition course meeting regularly to discuss learning outcomes, classroom assignments, teaching methods, and student assessments. As this model was conducted as a test pilot, only one small group of instructors (rather than the entire composition faculty) participated in a single PLC. In short, this study investigates an institution’s implementation of a professional development model using case study methodology.

In describing the research methodology used for this study, I refer to Cresswell’s (2007) detailed definition of the case study. According to Cresswell, case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and
documents and reports), and reports a case description and case-based themes
(2007, p. 73, emphasis is original).

I chose case-study methodology for the following reasons. First, I wanted to investigate a single first-year composition program, or a bounded case. Case study methodology differs from other qualitative research traditions in that it is highly focused on a single entity of study. For example, Merriam (2009) asserts, “the single most defining characteristic of case study research lies in delimiting the object of study, the case” (p. 40). L. Smith (1978) emphasizes the need for a bounded system or a single entity to conduct effective case study methodology.

For my study, then, I utilized a within-site case study (Cresswell, 2007), or a study investigating a single site. As a researcher, I am interested in how this particular first-year composition program serves as a site for instructors’ professional development. Further, I am interested both in how the individual instructors within the study describe their personal experiences working within the professional development model as well as how the members interact with one another as a community. Case study methodology, then, allows opportunities to observe group interactions (PLC meetings) and analyze group-generated documents (i.e. learning goals, lesson plans, etc.). As the model being studied is, by its own definition, a “collaborative community,” studying interactions among group members is essential.

In addition to observing group interactions, I am able to gather multiple sources of information with case-study methodology. As this study investigates a professional development model, it is necessary to observe and analyze this model as
it functions within the workplace as well as consider whether the model serves individual members’ needs. The participants in this study are able to reflect on their pedagogical content knowledge and how the PLC experience has influenced their instructional beliefs and practices through individual interviews and teaching portfolios. This case study approach, then, provides access to both group interactions and the individuals’ descriptions/perceptions of these interactions.

Finally, this study is positioned as a “trial run.” That is, as a researcher and assistant administrator in a first-year composition program, I am interested in observing this model and collecting participants’ reflections in a single implementation before considering how this model may (or may not) be utilized within an entire English department. Therefore, a single instrumental case study is being used, in which “the researcher focuses on an issue or concern, and then selects one bounded case to illustrate this issue” (Creswell, 2007, p. 74). This study may also be described as what Merriam (2009) calls “particularistic,” or a study in which “the case itself is important for what it reveals about the phenomenon and for what it might represent” (p. 43). That is, this study, focused on a small, select group of instructors in a single program, is not meant to represent the experiences of all first-year composition instructors within all educational institutions. Yet, this single case study might represent some professional development issues common to many instructors, offering insights into the general professionalization process of writing teachers.
Context.

For the past two years, I have not only taught undergraduate writing methods courses but have also worked as an assistant to the Writing Program Administrator of the First-Year Writing Program. Working with both undergraduate English majors and graduate writing instructors has helped me realize that becoming a “writing teacher” is an ongoing process. New instructors need courses in solid, reliable methods; these instructors, as well as experienced ones, also need ongoing training to experiment with new methods, learn new pedagogies, and expand content area knowledge. While many practicing secondary teachers are offered professional development through their school districts, the GTAs who teach first-year composition at the university do not always have such training opportunities.

These GTAs, who are graduate students specializing in creative writing, literature, or English education, undergo a one-week orientation prior to their first teaching appointment. This orientation is then followed by one semester-long practicum course, focused on first-year composition pedagogy. Upon completing the practicum course, instructors are presented with some ongoing professional development opportunities, such as attending pedagogy workshops lead by faculty members or fellow GTAs. The university also offers advanced courses in composition theory and grammar instruction. These advanced courses and pedagogical workshops, however, are optional. Future employment as first-year composition instructors is not contingent upon participation in further
composition/pedagogical coursework or training sessions. In short, instructors are not required to participate in a formal, long-term professional development program.

As an assistant to the WPA at the university being studied, I am often called upon to provide instructors with individual mentoring. While this one-on-one assistance may be helpful for the instructors who ask for it, these individual meetings do not constitute a formal training program for all teachers. In my position as the assistant (and as an English education practitioner and scholar), I am interested in investigating models for providing ongoing teacher training. This study provides me an opportunity to observe one such model and the participants’ reactions to this experience. As none of the participants have familiarity with this model, I act as the administrator of the PLC (similar as to how a principal might serve as the facilitator of a PLC in a K-12 setting). My role in this PLC is one of facilitator, not director. In initial team meetings, I familiarize the instructors with the PLC core principles. As the semester progresses, I no longer take part as an active participant, but as a silent observer, thus allowing the members to truly become co-collaborators and active PLC members.

Another key factor relating to this study’s context involves the leadership of the first-year composition program. During the semester in which this study was conducted, the program was under the leadership of an interim director. This interim director was not directly involved in the participating instructors’ prior professional development experiences. That is, the director did not lead the one-week orientation workshops or the one-semester practicum course completed by instructors. This
change in leadership may have affected the ways in which participants described their PLC experiences. In Chapter Three, the “leadership factor” (and its implications for this study) will be analyzed more thoroughly.

Limitations.

This study is limited in that it only observes one group of instructors at one university. Obviously this within-site study cannot accurately represent all first-year composition instructors’ experiences at all universities. By using maximum variation sampling, however, I allow a cross-section of the instructors at this institution to describe their experiences. These instructors’ varying insights, then, provide as detailed a portrayal of the PLC model being studied as possible in a within-site study. Further, this single instrumental case study provides a basis for further implementations of the PLC in future studies.

Participants.

The participants of this study are first-year composition instructors who have taught for at least one semester. These instructors have completed the formal training offered to new composition instructors at this institution: a weeklong orientation and a one-semester practicum course. The participants are all masters-level graduate students who are specializing in creative writing or literature. These participants reflect the demographics of this institution, as the majority of first-year composition courses are regularly taught by GTAs in these two academic programs.

Another criterion for choosing PLC participants is the instructors’ willingness to participate. Employment is not contingent on participants’ involvement in the
PLC. However, participants need to meet regularly and share teaching materials, methods, assessments, and concerns. They must be willing to give other members their time and material resources; they may also be called upon to coach instructors in their teaching methods. Therefore, participants must voluntarily agree to such aspects of PLC membership. In return, they must be interested in receiving resources, advice, and support from their group members. In short, participants must feel they have ongoing professional development needs and be willing to collaborate as a team to meet these needs. DuFour and Eaker (1998) explain, “In a professional learning community….educators create an environment that fosters mutual cooperation, emotional support, and personal growth as they work together…” (p. xii). Therefore, participants must be instructors who “buy into” the PLC philosophy and are willing to collaborate openly with their peers.

In order to find instructors who fit these criteria, I first referred to the classroom observation reports I had collected over the past two years. As the Assistant Director of First-Year Writing, I observed new composition instructors during Fall 2008 and Fall 2009 semesters. Following each classroom observation, I met with individual instructors to discuss their emerging teaching philosophies, current classroom practices, and future professional development needs. Within these reports, I noted instructors who expressed a desire for ongoing mentoring or writing instructor training beyond the required practicum course. Of the instructors who had self-indicated further professional development needs, I narrowed the possible participant pool by seeking “maximum variation” (Cresswell, 2007, p. 127). I chose
instructors representing differing educational specialty areas (creative writing and literature), differing years of teaching experience (1-3 semesters), differing financial status (funded and unfunded students of the institution), and differing genders. By applying these variables, the following four instructors from the original participant pool remained (all participants are referred to by pseudonyms).

Macey is a second-year MFA candidate in creative writing, specializing in fiction writing. During this study, she is in her fourth semester as a composition GTA. The university has funded her throughout her program, meaning she receives a salary and tuition remission for her work as a composition instructor, teaching 1-2 courses per semester. Prior to completing the orientation and practicum course at this institution, Macey has no previous training or experiences in teaching composition or any other content area.

Ben is also a second-year MFA candidate in creative writing. He is specializing in playwriting and has been enrolled as an unfunded student (meaning the university does not grant him tuition remission). Ben has been hired as an adjunct faculty member for four consecutive semesters, teaching 1-2 sections of first-year composition each semester. Like Macey, Ben has no received no training or coursework in education or in composition studies prior to his teaching experiences at this institution.

Beth is a first-year candidate, earning a master’s degree in literature. During this study, this is her second semester teaching first-year composition as a funded GTA. She has just completed her practicum course. Unlike Macey and Ben, Beth
has a bachelor’s degree in education; she is certified to teach secondary-level English language arts and has interned for one semester in a high school English classroom. Beth has no educational background in composition studies.

Finally, Chris is a second-year master’s student, specializing in literature. Though she has been funded by the university for two years, this is her first year teaching first-year composition. Along with Beth, Chris has just completed the practicum course, and she comes to this position with teaching experience. Prior to enrolling as a GTA, Chris taught elementary- and middle-school students at a Montessori school. Like the other participants in this study, Chris has not completed any coursework in composition studies beyond the practicum course.

First-Year Composition PLC: Core Principles for Data Collection

A professional learning community is not merely defined by a group of teachers who are willing to meet regularly and collaborate; rather, a true PLC follows three core principles laid out by founders Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker: ensuring students learn, promoting a culture of collaboration, and evidencing effective teaching results. For this study, I have maintained the true intent of the PLC by using these three principles to structure our team’s purpose and interactions throughout the semester. I will briefly describe these core principles, how I have modified traditional PLC principles to fit the setting of this study, and how these core principles have determined my methods for data collection.
Ensuring that students learn.

As DuFour (2004) has emphasized repeatedly in his scholarship, the success of the PLC model lies in its core mission, which is "...not simply to ensure that students are taught but to ensure that they learn. This simple shift - from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning - has profound implications for schools" (p. 8). DuFour and Eaker (1998) suggest school administrators and teachers build the foundation for school-wide PLCs by clarifying the school’s mission (what students are meant to learn), and by establishing values and goals (what attitudes and behaviors must school personnel exhibit to promote the school’s mission for student learning). Once these foundations are in place, individual PLC teams then create their own student learning goals based on grade levels or content areas.

In this study, the PLC model was not applied to an entire school, department, or program. Instead, four instructors of the same course (first-year composition) were asked to form a PLC team. As this team was comprised of a small number of instructors rather than an entire faculty, we did not work with administrators, fellow composition instructors, or instructors of other courses to form school-wide mission, value, and goal statements. As the administrator of this PLC team, I chose to modify this model by focusing solely on the course these instructors teach. In our initial team meeting, we discussed the “mission statement” created by the First-Year Writing administrative faculty for this course. This mission statement reads:

Students explore the features of different genres and the technologies used to produce them, and they learn to create content for multiple genres. In
addition, students learn to use a variety of source materials for research purposes, analyze visual as well as written components of texts, and make informed decisions about appropriate sentence structure, grammar, and punctuation.

DuFour and Eaker (1998) insist that a successful mission statement cannot simply be a “half-hearted affirmation” that “all students can learn” created by a lone administrator or policy maker (p. 62). What is needed is a precise target for student learning endorsed by all team members.

In this study’s PLC, members considered the first-year writing program’s mission statement a fairly good summation of the course’s content. One instructor described it as “all-encompassing;” however, another called it “so broad that it is almost vague.” A third instructor said, “It would be impossible for us to focus on all of these things.” Rather than using this mission statement as our team’s goal, we decided to narrow our focus to a more attainable, precise learning target. As the team’s administrator, I suggested we look to the specific course learning outcomes established by the first-year writing administrative faculty (see Appendix F). I asked the instructors to choose the one learning outcome they felt was most important for students to learn. Very quickly, all team members agreed on the second learning outcome as our team’s focus: “Students should be able to create content in multiple genres.”

As the PLC administrator (as well as a researcher), I felt it was important for the team members to not adopt a mission statement or learning outcome simply
because an administrator assigned them to teach it. In order for this mission or goal to have meaning for the instructors’ teaching philosophies and practices, the goal needed to be specific to each instructor’s course. In describing this first core principle of the PLC model, “ensuring that all students learn,” DuFour (2004) suggests instructors ask themselves the following questions: “1. What do we want each student to learn? 2. How will we know when each student has learned it?” (p. 8). The first-year composition PLC addressed these questions by first choosing a common learning outcome, then by focusing specifically on this outcome when teaching their third project in the semester. Interestingly, each instructor had designed a completely different third project, so instructors had to further personalize the team goal by creating specific formative and summative assessments of this outcome.

To collect data on the team goal, each instructor’s personalized view of this goal, and how this goal affected each instructor’s classroom practices, I collected a teaching portfolio from each team member (see Appendix G). This teaching portfolio included teaching materials (i.e. lesson plans, rubrics, classroom activities) and individual reflections on each instructor’s experiences teaching within the PLC model. The purpose of these reflections is to provide what Marshall and Rossman (2006) call “multiple constructed realities, studied holistically” (p. 53). That is, this case study seeks to portray how, and in what ways, instructors describe working as individuals and as members within this professional development model.
A culture of collaboration.

Despite compelling evidence indicating that working collaboratively represents best practice, teachers in many schools continue to work in isolation...the powerful collaboration that characterizes professional learning communities is a systematic process in which teachers work together to analyze and improve their classroom practice (DuFour, 2004, p. 9).

Within the first two team meetings, members already evidenced a culture of collaboration by quickly choosing a shared learning outcome, agreeing to meet regularly, and offering to share lesson plans, assessment ideas, and teaching strategies. Cultivating such a community, however, is not necessarily an easy task among postsecondary instructors. In fact, one member admitted that she has tried to share her teaching ideas with fellow instructors, but has been repeatedly "made fun of." Another instructor agreed that professional academia is a very competitive, sometimes "combative," environment. It is a place, she explained, where instructors tend to "protect" their "intellectual property," such as research ideas and teaching methods. All instructors in this PLC agreed that collaboration is not typical among their peers.

In order to gauge the impact of such a collaborative culture on these instructors, I collected data in the following ways. First, I conducted individual semi-structured interviews with the instructors. These interviews were used to determine the instructors' "confidence and expertise" in their pedagogical content knowledge prior to participation in the PLC. In these interviews, instructors also described their
experiences working with peers and their strategies for classroom problem-solving prior to the PLC. In addition collecting data to note how individuals explain their experiences in the PLC, I also gathered data on how the individual instructors interacted as a group. By observing the ways PLC members verbally (and nonverbally) collaborate during team members, I recorded patterns of communication within the group. These patterns can be compared to those established by "traditional" PLC groups, as documented in research gathered from the K-12 educational setting. Similarities and differences between this PLC and "traditional" ones reveal how, and in what ways, this model may need further adaptation if it is to be used with postsecondary educators.

A focus on results.

Finally, the professional learning community does not find success simply by creating collaborative teams focused on common goals. A PLC requires its members to evidence student learning by engaging in active research and sharing classroom data. Within our PLC, we agreed to assess how and in what ways students have (or have not) learned our shared learning outcome by having each instructor create a teaching portfolio of his/her focus project. This portfolio, described in Appendix G, allows instructors the opportunity to collect teaching materials, analyze teaching methods, assess student learning, and reflect upon experiences working collaboratively and independently as instructors. At the end of the semester, instructors turned in this portfolio to the PLC administrator (myself), and also shared their insights on student learning verbally with the team. This portfolio, then, was a
way for instructors to record and share their evidence of classroom research; further, the portfolio was a means for me to gather data on how instructors perceived the PLC impacting their classroom practices.

The "traditional" PLC model gauges its effectiveness on the basis of results, which usually entails instructors collecting evidence of student learning. For the purpose of this study, I am primarily interested in how the PLC does (or does not) meet the professional development needs of this group of instructors. Therefore, I decided to modify the traditional PLC "focus on results" principle. Rather than gauge the PLC's effectiveness on student learning, I considered instructor's growth. By conducting a group, semi-structured interview, I allowed members to share their personal and professional growth within this model, discuss the effectiveness of the PLC, and offer suggestions for structuring this model in future studies.

**Data Analysis: Analyzing Collaboration, Instructors' Professional Growth, and Student Achievement**

According to Richard DuFour (2004), co-founder of the PLC, three core principles differentiate this model from other educational reform movements; members of a PLC (1) ensure students learn, (2) establish a culture of collaboration, and (3) focus on results (p. 6). For this study, I have slightly altered these three principles to create a theoretical framework for analyzing the data I have collected through group meeting observations, instructors' written reflections, and instructors' teaching portfolios. My core principles for data analysis are: student achievement, culture of collaboration, and instructors' professional growth. By keeping the
“traditional” PLC principles in tact, my study reveals how, and in what ways, this model can be adapted to a different educational setting. That is, this study evidences that the PLC model need not be drastically altered when adopted at the postsecondary level.

One important distinction between the “traditional” PLC model and the one used in this study, however, is the roles instructors play. This difference can be seen in the ways the third core principle – focus on results – is defined by each PLC model. In the traditional model, a focus on results occurs when instructors “...honestly confront data on student achievement and…work together to improve their results rather than make excuses” (DuFour, 2004, p.11). In this study, instructors do assess student achievement; however, improving students’ learning is not the sole “result” desired. This study also seeks to determine the PLC model’s effectiveness in providing ongoing training and support to first-year writing instructors. Therefore, the focus on results principle has been modified to consider instructors’ professional growth. A comparison of the core principles used in both the traditional and modified PLC models is portrayed in figure 2.1.

While analyzing the data within the framework of these three principles, I first noticed that Culture of Collaboration was the one most observable in group meetings and most referenced in instructor’s reflections. Student Achievement and Professional Growth were not “observed” in the group’s interactions; these themes were evidenced in the individual instructors’ reflections and portfolios. In Chapter Three, I will discuss the group holistically as a Culture of Collaboration was
evidenced in their regular group meetings. This chapter will then end with an individual instructor case study, providing an in-depth analysis of how the *Culture of Collaboration* principle specifically impacted this instructor's pedagogical practices and beliefs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Traditional PLC</strong></th>
<th><strong>3 Core Principles</strong></th>
<th><strong>Modified PLC</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School creates mission and vision statements for PLC teams. Each team determines specific goals for student learning.</td>
<td>Ensure Students Learn (Student Achievement)</td>
<td>Instructors participating in a PLC focus on a specific learning goal. Instructors collect data evidencing student achievement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructors participate in open, intentional collaboration focused on learning for all students.</td>
<td>Culture of Collaboration</td>
<td>Instructors meet regularly to discuss focus project and focus learning goal, instructors voluntarily share teaching resources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructors collect data on student achievement and devise new learning goals and teaching practices based on results.</td>
<td>Focus on Results (Instructor Professional Growth)</td>
<td>In reflective writing and interviews, instructors describe how, and in what ways, the PLC experience has impacted their teaching practices and/or beliefs.</td>
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</table>

Figure 2.1 Comparisons of Traditional and Modified PLC Core Principles

In Chapter Four, I will address how, through individual reflections and teaching portfolios, instructors perceived the PLC experience impacting their pedagogical content knowledge. The *Focus on Results* principle, then, will be addressed by measuring instructors’ professional growth. Finally, Chapter Five will analyze the third PLC principle, *Ensuring Students Learn*, in two ways. This chapter will compare differences in the K-12 and postsecondary educational settings influencing how this PLC model was modified. These modifications resulted in instructors devising individual student assessments, which are described in Chapter 53.
In conclusion, Figure 2.2 shows how the three core principles were modified and used to collect and analyze data within this study.

Figure 2.2 PLC Core Principles
CHAPTER III
A CULTURE OF COLLABORATION

Defining “A Culture of Collaboration”

At the K-12 educational level, much research documents effective practices for engaging instructors in professional learning (Applebee, 1986; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2005; Hillocks, 2009; Hord, 1997; Grossman & Richert, 1988; Lanier & Little, 1986; Lortie, 1975; Smagorinski, 2009;). According to this research, one key factor promoting successful professional development is the building of “strong working relationships” among instructors (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009, p. 11). Not surprisingly, the PLC model also promotes instructors working within collaborative, supportive communities (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Specifically, DuFour and Eaker (1998) describe an effective teaching community possessing the following traits:

It is clear that the effort to transform a school into a professional learning community is more likely to be sustained when teachers participate in reflective dialogue; observe and react to one another’s teaching; jointly develop curriculum and assessment practices; work together to implement new programs and strategies; share lesson plans and materials; and collectively engage in problem-solving, action research, and continuous improvement practices (pp. 117-118).
The type of community depicted by scholars is not necessarily easy to implement. In order for instructors to participate in reflective dialogue, react to one another's teaching and develop common curriculum goals and teaching strategies, these instructors must spend a great deal of time working collaboratively. In fact, this intensely collaborative model challenges the current work environment and attitudes existing at many educational institutions.

Darling-Hammond et al (2009) suggest that some instructors may resist this call for collaboration because the idea of "community" has not traditionally been associated within teachers' individual identities or the institutional structures within which they work (p. 11). They explain, "As researchers have shown many times over the past three decades, the nation's teachers exhibit a strongly individualistic ethos, owing largely to the built-in privacy and isolation of their daily work as it has been organized in most U.S. schools..." (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009, p. 11). DuFour and Eaker (1998) echo this sentiment, describing the act of teaching as performed by "...a single individual who stands alone before a group of students and works in isolation" (p. 115). Such descriptions underscore the seclusion many elementary and secondary instructors experience. These instructors, nonetheless, are situated within close proximity to many other teachers; they daily see colleagues in hallways, faculty break rooms, and one another's classrooms. K-12 level instructors also often teach the same students, attend the same meetings, and have the same teaching schedules. Compare these instructors to their postsecondary counterparts, who may teach in a completely separate building, on a different day, and at a different time from other
instructors. If there is a sense of isolation among K-12 educators, then, it stands to reason that postsecondary instructors experience even less community, collaboration, and support based on their work schedule and environment.

Considering the extreme isolation of many postsecondary instructors, it should come as no surprise that the instructors participating in this study unanimously cited regular team meetings as the most beneficial aspect to the PLC experience. According to all instructors, these team meetings provided them with a "sense of community" or a "support group." Therefore, I used PLC group meetings and instructors' reflections to collect data detailing how the Culture of Collaboration impacted participants. In analyzing this data, I noticed three sub-themes: PLC members used meetings to share teaching ideas, to problem-solve classroom issues, and to encourage one another. In Figure 3.1, I show my methods for collecting and analyzing data evidencing the Culture of Collaboration principle.

Figure 3.1 Culture of Collaboration Data Analysis
In the following section, I will discuss each sub-theme’s emergence within this PLC as well as its impact on instructors’ professional development. Finally, I will offer an individual case study detailing one instructor’s experiences working within the PLC’s culture of collaboration.

The First-Year Composition PLC: Analyzing Culture of Collaboration Themes

**Idea-sharing.**

In all six of our PLC team meetings, the theme of idea-sharing was present. By the term “idea-sharing,” I simply refer to instructors freely sharing their teaching ideas, lesson plans, and activities with one another. That is, instructors talked about their ideas as a natural part of the group conversations. They were not required to bring in a specific lesson plan or themed activity. Instead, instructors shared ideas in reaction to teaching issues, questions, and problems raised by their peers.

As administrator of this group, I decided to keep the traditional PLC core principles in tact – *Ensure Students Learn*, promote a *Culture of Collaboration*, and *Focus on Results*. In our first PLC meeting, the instructors and I agreed the best way for us to achieve these principles was for each instructor to focus on a single project being taught in his/her first-year composition course. For this focus project, each instructor agreed to create a teaching portfolio to collect teaching materials, reflect on teaching practices, and document student learning (See Appendix G for portfolio description). As instructors began collecting their teaching materials and reflecting on their teaching practices, they openly shared ideas and practical resources with one another.
Two examples of such idea-sharing exchanges took place during our fourth meeting. In this meeting, instructors had just started teaching their focus projects; the purpose of this meeting was to offer status reports on their projects and discuss possible assessment strategies. Within this discussion, Chris shared two aspects from her focus project. First she explained her assessment process; she planned to utilize pre-project questionnaires and post-project reflective questions to gain formative and summative evaluations of her students’ learning. Next, Chris talked about what she was currently doing in her classroom; she shared her strategies for teaching students to conduct primary and secondary source research. After listening to Chris, Beth noted, “I didn’t do a research component in this project last semester, but as I hear you talking, I think I want to do that...I think research is needed for students to think more critically.” Later in the meeting, Beth again expressed an interest in adopting some of Chris’ assessment ideas. Beth told Chris, “I think I’m going to use some of your ideas, like doing a pre-project questionnaire and doing a reflection before and after the project. I didn’t use assessments like these the last time I taught this project, but I think they’ll work.”

In his post-PLC experience reflection, Ben described these meetings as “free sharing of ideas.” Here, “free” implies that the instructors are all sharing resources willingly; they accept others’ ideas even if they teach different projects or possess different teaching philosophies. Ben’s description seems an accurate portrayal of Chris and Beth’s idea-exchange. During this meeting, Beth did not explicitly say she needed ideas on how to teach her students research methods or ideas on how to
perform formative assessments. That is, she did not ask for help or advice in these areas. Instead, she simply listened to Chris freely share her teaching practices. By hearing what others were doing in their classrooms, Beth was able to see “gaps” in her own teaching ideas and practices. For example, Beth admitted she did not teach research methods in her past classes, but now realized the importance of adding research to her current project. In her post-PLC reflection, Beth explained that working with the other instructors meant more than “just gaining new ideas and teaching practices.” Instead, the PLC experience caused Beth to be “more intentional with those ideas and practices” in her actual classroom.

During PLC meetings, instructors regularly participated in this “free sharing of ideas,” in which members simply shared the lessons and activities they were currently teaching. This idea-sharing not only prompted instructors to individually reflect upon and change their own practices, as in Beth’s situation. Idea-sharing also allowed instructors opportunities to test out new ideas and theories, by being part of a collaborative community. For example, Ben announced to the team during the fourth meeting, “I have an idea I’ve been thinking about since we last met…” Immediately, the other instructors asked him to share his teaching idea. Ben explained that his students were currently completing a project in which they teach the class how to write a specific genre by creating instructions in the form of a “recipe.” Ben had taught this project several times before, but still didn’t know what to do when the students had finished creating these recipes. He wondered what might happen if each student was assigned to test out a recipe created by another student. After hearing
Ben describe this idea, Macey said this would be a great experiment. Chris and Beth quickly agreed and offered Ben further teaching ideas, such as adding copyediting and design editing components to this “experiment.” Ben listened to this advice and promised to try this project with his class later in the semester.

This example illustrates one way in which idea-sharing can be highly beneficial for instructors. Here, the PLC served as Ben’s sounding board. Chris described the PLC giving her “a sense of teamwork when I’m alone in my own classroom.” This sense of teamwork was evidenced as Chris, Beth and Macey listened to Ben’s idea and readily offered assistance and encouragement in implementing his new idea. Darling-Hammond et al. (2009) describe this aspect of teachers’ professional communities as “a shared sense of intellectual purpose and a sense of collective responsibility for student learning” (p. 11). In Ben’s situation, none of his other PLC team members personally knew or taught his students. However, they enacted collective responsibility for these students’ learning by offering Ben teaching strategies, assessment ideas, and daily lessons for his experimental project. Such collaboration not only supplied Ben with the practical resources needed to teach his new project; his team members also offered him encouragement and moral support.

Idea-sharing, then, held much significance for the instructors of this PLC. By freely sharing daily teaching practices, instructors were exposed to new ideas and resources. Listening to others’ classroom experiences also allowed instructors opportunities to reflect on their own teaching practices. Finally, the PLC served as a
sounding board for instructors to share experimental ideas and gain the resources and moral support needed to carry out innovations in their classrooms. Within the traditional PLC model, DuFour (2004) calls for teachers to develop communities, in which

Collaborative conversations...make public what has traditionally been private – goals, strategies, materials, pacing, questions, concerns, and results. These discussions give each teacher someone to turn and talk to, and they are explicitly structured to improve the classroom practices of teachers – individually and collectively (p. 10).

In this PLC, instructors improved their teaching practices, as well as influenced one another’s practices, by sharing ideas in a collaborative, supportive community. This culture of collaboration was further evidenced within PLC meetings as instructors addressed another professional concern: classroom problem-solving.

**Problem-solving.**

Unlike idea-sharing, which emerged as a theme in all six of our PLC team meetings, problem-solving did not take place until our fifth and sixth meetings. The term “problem-solving” refers to instructors voluntarily talking with their peers about issues experienced in their classrooms, including student apathy, failed lesson plans or activities, and managing student behavior. The late emergence of this theme may be attributed to the following factors. First, instructors simply may not have experienced any significant teaching difficulties during the first few weeks of the semester. Second, the instructors may not have felt comfortable sharing their
classroom problems in our earlier meetings. Finally, the structure of our first three meetings may have restricted instructors’ abilities to share teaching experiences.

As the administrator of this PLC, I felt it necessary to structure and lead our initial meetings in order to acquaint the instructors with this professional development model and our use of it during the semester. Therefore, in our first two meetings, I introduced the instructors to the PLC’s core principles, and we discussed how we might adhere to these principles by conducting bi-weekly meetings and compiling individual teaching portfolios. During our third meeting, I led the group in discussing their focus projects and assessment practices. From that point onward, I no longer created a focus for our remaining three meetings; instead, instructors chose discussion topics organically. In our fourth meeting, instructors chose to discuss their assessment ideas. In meetings five and six, instructors did not specify topics for discussion. In both meetings, however, the theme of problem-solving emerged as the prominent topic.

In fact, our fifth meeting began with Macey entering the room and saying, “I had a teaching problem today. Can we talk about it?” Macey had just come from teaching her class and looked visibly shaken. Coincidently, another instructor had brought a plate of cookies to share. Macey eyed the plate and said, “I need a cookie. Then I’ll tell you about it.” Immediately Beth jumped into the conversation. She said, “Well, while you’re eating, I might as well talk about my bad day.” Beth explained that she had just finished teaching her students how to create annotated bibliographies for their current project. She admitted that her students struggled
when writing bibliographies last semester, and she was having difficulty teaching this topic again this semester. Chris commiserated, saying, “Yeah, my students seem to be using ‘EasyBib’ a lot lately. I can tell because the website is not updated with the new MLA style. I don’t want them to do research that way. I want them to do it by themselves.” Beth agreed, saying, “Absolutely. I gave my students a quiz. They had to figure out the citations and use common sense to figure it out, not the Internet.” Macey liked the quiz idea and suggested trying a particular style manual she had used with her students. Chris agreed to try out some of these suggestions, and she admitted, “MLA citation is just a minor problem. A real problem I have right now is two hostile students.” Macey replied, “This will springboard into my issue, so please share.”

For the rest of the meeting, Chris and Macey described the issues they were currently experiencing with specific students in their classes. Though each instructor faced a different issue, both felt these issues affected their relationships with individual students and their classroom learning environments. Both Chris and Macey asked the team for advice on how to solve their situations. Other team members readily offered suggestions, explaining how they had handled similar situations in past semesters. By the end of the meeting, both Chris and Macey had received advice and moral support. In post-PLC reflections, all instructors commented on the effectiveness of these problem-solving sessions. Ben said it was good to know “he’s not the only one struggling with classroom issues.” He admitted that sharing problems and new ideas with one another made teaching “so much easier
and the potential for success in the classroom greater.” Chris described the PLC as “somewhere safe to turn with concerns or successes in the classroom.” The PLC, then, had served an important supportive role for these instructors.

At many institutions, new first-year writing instructors may be assigned to some type of collaborative community (Barr-Ebest, 2002; Broz, 2002; Dobrin, 2005; Latterell, 1996; S.Rose, 2002; Weiser, 2002; Wilhoit, 2002). For example, a new GTA may work with an experienced GTA mentor. Or, instructors may work closely with members of their practicum course. That instructors are “assigned” to groups, however, does not necessarily mean they are participating in a “support group.” Further, the instructors in this PLC, like many instructors at other institution, were not assigned to mentors. In fact, the instructors in this study were not currently part of a formal professional development program or an informal mentoring/support group.

After seeing the prominent role problem-solving played in our team meetings, I wanted to learn how these instructors had resolved classroom issues prior to participating in the PLC. Therefore, I developed three reflective questions to dig deeper into this topic. The first two questions directly address the issue of problem-solving. The third question asks relates to the instructors’ concept of a teaching community.

1. Describe one teaching experience (prior to participating in this PLC) in which you faced a “difficult” situation (i.e. conflict with a student, difficulty with a project, etc.).

2. Explain how you resolved the “difficult situation” described above.
3. Please give a general description of your “working relationship(s)” with other first-year composition instructors prior to participating in this PLC.

In response to the first two questions, instructors admitted to solving classroom problems in two ways: They either tried to “fix” the situation on their own, or they asked the WPA for assistance. These instructors, then, did not appear to be part of a support group, though they were acquainted with and had regular contact with other first-year composition instructors.

In response to the third question, instructors gave varied answers. Beth, who had just completed her teaching practicum course, responded that she “enjoyed meeting other instructors” in that class, but she no longer “had much contact” with them. Outside the PLC group meetings, Beth did not talk about her teaching with other graduate students. Chris, who had also just taken the practicum course, commented, “The practicum course exposed me to other teachers, but I didn’t really learn how to teach from them.” Like Beth, Chris did not consider her former classmates as a “teaching community” she could turn to for advice and support.

Macey described her “working relationships” with other GTAs as being both beneficial and detrimental to her teaching identity. She explained, “Our teaching methods course constituted a professional relationship. Hearing about successes and failures from other teachers was helpful. Having the writing program director as the ‘authority figure’ in the room to offer enlightened, researched opinions was also very helpful.” Within the practicum course setting, then, Macey seemed to feel a part of a teaching community. Outside of this course, however, she held a different opinion.
She stated, "I have also encountered other writers who teach who think that I spend way too much time on my teaching. They see first-year writing as something they are forced to do and talk about teaching like it's unimportant." As a result of these interactions with GTAs who are not invested in teaching, Macey admitted to not feeling comfortable turning to her peers for teaching advice.

Similar to Macey, Ben found the practicum course a means for establishing helpful "working relationships" with other composition instructors. Yet, these relationships did not develop into a long-term teaching community. He said, "My first year, I had a close relationship with a couple of instructors with whom I would talk to, get advice from, exchange ideas with, etc. However, this interaction diminished at the beginning of my second year (and one instructor has since left this school).” Ben described feeling "isolated.” Unlike many of the GTAs who live close to campus, Ben commutes from sixty miles away. Building relationships with other instructors seems especially challenging for Ben, and other commuters, who do not have regular contact with their peers.

The experiences of the PLC members in this study corroborate other research on collaborative teaching communities; that is, such a community does not simply "happen.” Institutions must be intentional in providing the time, space, and resources for such collaboration among instructors to take place. Darling-Hammond et al. (2009) insist, "Research shows that when schools are strategic in creating time and productive working relationships within academic departments...benefits can include...more willingness to share practices and try new ways of teaching, and more
success in solving problems of practice” (p. 11). Similarly, DuFour and Eaker (1998) maintain, “To build professional learning communities, meaningful collaboration must be systematically embedded into the daily life of the school” (p. 118). These scholars propose that time for community collaboration should be built into the school year; instructors must meet in teams with specific goals; teams need training and support; and instructors must be willing to work together as professional colleagues (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, pp. 121-129).

Community, then, is not necessarily a naturally occurring phenomenon. A true learning community, in which instructors share ideas directly related to classroom practices and collaborative learning goals, takes time to develop. It also requires instructors to “buy-in” to the model and be willing to support one another. This leads directly into the final collaboration theme which emerged within the PLC studied: instructor-to-instructor encouragement.

**Encouragement.**

Within our PLC meetings, instructors regularly shared teaching ideas and offered advice on classroom issues. These interactions hold significance because they evidence the instructors’ willingness to collaborate as a learning community. The act of collaboration itself, however, is not the only noteworthy outcome of these meetings. It is the supportive, encouraging manner in which these instructors conducted their meetings that is equally important. The term “encouragement,” then, refers to specific verbal interactions, in which instructors use positive expressions (i.e. “You did a good job” or “That’s a great idea”).
One example of encouragement took place during our fifth meeting, the meeting in which Macey opened discussion by declaring, “I had a teaching problem today. Can we talk about it?” The other instructors immediately offered Macey moral support by saying they wanted to hear about her problem. Interestingly, while Macey took a few minutes to calm down before sharing her teaching story, Beth began talking about her recent “bad experience” in the classroom: many students had failed to complete their assignment, making it difficult for Beth to teach her planned material. When Beth finished sharing her story, Chris then talked about a teaching problem she was experiencing: two students were exhibiting “hostile” behavior during group discussions, which Chris felt was tainting the supportive classroom environment she was trying to establish.

Up until this point, no instructors had shared any negative teaching experiences during our regular meetings. Macey’s straight-forward announcement (I had a teaching problem today) and call for support (Can we talk about it?) seemed to open a new outlet for discussion among her team members. In this instance, Beth and Chris offered Macey moral support not only by agreeing to hear about her teaching problem. They further showed Macey support by sharing their own teaching struggles, proving to Macey she was not alone – all instructors face difficulties from time to time.

As this meeting progressed, team members continued to offer Macey support in two ways. First, they gave her advice on how to resolve her current problem: a student verbally criticized the relevancy of Macey’s classroom activity in front of the
entire class. As a result, Macey felt her authority as an instructor had been challenged. In response to Macey’s story, Ben described how he has confronted “difficult students” in the past. He shared with the group the different ideas communicating with “difficult students” through email correspondance, individual conferences, and written contracts. Beth and Chris also offered Macey practical advice on conducting “intervention” meetings with students. Further, they showed Macey encouragement by commenting on how she had handled this situation thus far. For example, Beth said, “You did well under the circumstances.” And Chris assured Macey that her interactions with her “problem student” were appropriate and “not out of line at all.”

In this meeting, then, instructors evidenced encouragement to one another by sharing teaching difficulties, offering practical advice, and affirming current practices. While such moral support may, at first glance, seem a mere by-product of regular team meetings, this instructor-to-instructor encouragement actually serves a vital role in this professional development model. First, these personal interactions, in which team members honestly share their teaching struggles, help counter the isolation many instructors daily experience.

Further, this isolation may be magnified by the GTAs’ tenuous position within the English departments in which they work. That is, GTAs are not full-time faculty members; they are also not “simply” full-time students. Instead, they inhabit a role fraught with ambiguous authority. Bly (2000) describes the position of GTAs as “a difficult one,” in which instructors “face a fundamental conflict between the position
of authority they possess as composition professors and the lack of authority inherent in their roles as students in a graduate program” (p. 2). For many GTAs, possessing authority or confidence as composition professors may, in fact, be as challenging as becoming confident graduate students. Usually novice instructors need both practical classroom experience and professional training/mentoring in order to gain the confidence and knowledge “expert” instructors possess.

However, this is not to suggest that novice composition instructors possess no teaching expertise whatsoever. As evidenced during the PLC meetings held in this study, each instructor shared teaching experiences, wisdom, and advice, regardless if he/she had been teaching for one semester or for years. These collaborative meetings embodied the type of professional development scholars have recommended repeatedly for over a decade (Boyer Commission, 1998; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 2008; Long et al., 1996; Wildman & Niles, 1987). That is, scholars have called for “high-intensity, job-embedded collaborative learning” among instructors (Darling-Hammond, 2009, p. 4). Yet, this type of learning must entail more than simply meeting regularly to discuss curriculum. Instead, instructors must also be willing to “engage in regular discussions of classroom problems with other new teachers” (Boyer Commission, 1998). To collaborate successfully as a team, then, teachers provide their peers with practical resources (i.e. lesson plans, instructional advice, etc.) as well as genuine moral support.
The sharing of problems and offering of moral support is more than just a sentimental by-product of a teaching community; rather, personal interactions among instructors provide actual benefits. According to Hord’s (2008) research on professional learning communities among postsecondary instructors, teachers not only gain new teaching ideas by meeting regularly with their colleagues; rather, she notes, “the most significant result was an increase in teacher morale and motivation. They were not alone in their work, but had colleagues” (pp. 10-11). This camaraderie was acknowledged by the members of the PLC in this study. Instructors described the PLC as “a sense of teamwork,” “an accountability group,” “a place to turn to,” and “a place to discuss solutions.” Never did any of the instructors say to one another, “I’m only a graduate student, so I don’t have any advice to offer you on teaching.” Instead, the instructors used their own failures and successes in teaching to give the team suggestions.

To better illustrate the effect of this encouraging, supportive, collaborative community on instructors, I will end this section with an individual instructor case study of Macey. Since Macey was the instructor who repeatedly came to the group for teaching “help,” and since she taught for a full year without the support of a teaching community, she is a good person to profile for the theme, Culture of Collaboration, and this theme’s impact on her teaching beliefs and practices. While Macey is not meant to represent all GTAs, her descriptions of “teaching in a vacuum” do provide a rich depiction of what might (and does) happen to instructors during a full year of teaching without the support of a mentoring/PLC group. In her
reflections and follow-up interview, she offers specific examples of how teaching without support affected her teaching identity and practices prior to participating in the PLC and how the PLC helped to “fill the vacuum” she experienced.

**Individual Case Study on the Culture of Collaboration: Macey**

**Instructor’s background.**

Macey had taught four sections of first-year composition before participating in this PLC model. Although being an instructor at this institution is her first teaching experience, she plans on becoming a university-level English instructor and would like to work at a small, liberal arts college. In addition to participating in PLC group meetings and completing her teaching portfolio, Macey met with me individually twice over the course of the semester. During these meetings, we discussed her teaching philosophy, past classroom experiences, and her reasons for participating in the PLC.

In our initial meeting, Macey describes the act of teaching as “extremely enjoyable and rewarding” and admits joining the PLC for several reasons. She explains,

I enjoy the camaraderie between instructors engaged in a common task. Talking to others about what I am doing in my classroom also serves as accountability. Sharing my ideas with others makes me feel more confident that I am doing the best service that I can for my students as their first year writing teacher. Teaching a course in a vacuum, without discussing failures
and successes with others, can be dangerous, as it inhibits professional, pedagogical growth.

These statements indicate that Macey is interested in building cooperative, collaborative relationships with fellow instructors. She also views such relationships as a means to gaining professional growth. Most interesting, however, is her use of the phrase “teaching in a vacuum.” During our one-on-one meetings, as well as our PLC team meetings, Macey often refers to her past classroom experiences as “teaching in a vacuum.” Her persistent use of this phrase prompts me to schedule a follow-up interview with Macey; I am interested in learning more about her working relationships with other instructors prior to participating in the PLC. Specifically, I am interested in how Macey has approached problem-solving in the past, as she is the one PLC member who repeatedly seeks advice from her peers during our team meetings.

**Teaching experiences prior to PLC participation.**

In our one-on-one meeting, I first asked Macey to describe a past teaching experience in which she faced a “difficult” situation and describe how she resolved this situation. She talked about a non-traditional student she encountered during her second semester of teaching. This student, she explained, “challenged my authority” and “disrupted our class dynamic with his loud, assertive behavior.” Macey admitted to feeling “uncomfortable” asserting her authority with this student, who was not only disruptive but also considerably older than she was. To resolve this issue, Macey consulted the program’s WPA, who worked with her to determine a feasible solution.
I next asked Macey why she sought help from the WPA rather than from fellow instructors in this situation. She said discussing teaching issues with other instructors could sometimes have positive outcomes; however, she had far more negative interactions with her peers than positive ones. Macey, who is a second-year MFA candidate specializing in fiction writing, views herself as both a teacher and a writer. She explains, “I have always wanted to be a teacher. I’m in the MFA program because I want to teach... and I feel I have a good balance between teaching and writing.” Her desire to become an instructor at a liberal arts college, she believes, places her in an “awkward position” with her peers. She sees the other MFA students as being focused on writing. “Writers want to be writers, not teachers,” she explains. “They see teaching as the secondary aspect in this program.” As a result, she is often criticized by other GTA instructors for her future career goals and current teaching practices.

For example, Macey describes two recent encounters with her peers. As she and the other GTAs were waiting for their graduate-level writing class to begin, Macey began talking about a new project she was teaching in her first-year composition course. She was really excited about this project, about her students’ positive reactions, and she simply wanted to share her teaching ideas. Another instructor responded by telling Macey she was spending too much time on her teaching; Macey would never “make it” as a writer if she continued to “waste all that time” on teaching.
Later in the week, Macey was holding individual conferences with her students in an office she shares with other GTA composition instructors. Macey said she felt “excited” because these conferences with her students going “really well.” Then, one of the other instructors said he couldn’t believe Macey spends that much time on her teaching. He suggested she could have written two short stories in the amount of time it took her to read her students’ drafts and hold conferences with them.

It is interactions such as these, which cause Macey to feel she has a “different ideology” than most of her peers in the creative writing program. Like her peers, Macey does believe improving her creative writing skills and publishing her work are important outcomes of her graduate program. However, she also views herself as a dedicated instructor who considers teaching as much more than a part-time, temporary job. Teaching first-year composition is Macey’s entry into the academic workplace; therefore, she embraces this experience as an opportunity to grow professionally.

**Analyzing Macey’s experiences with the Culture of Collaboration.**

The PLC group, then, appears to have served an important role in Macey’s professional growth; it is her “safe place” to experience a *Culture of Collaboration*. Like the other members of this PLC, Macey experienced this theme in three ways: idea-sharing, problem-solving, and support. More specifically, Macey evidenced these sub-themes in verbal interactions with other PLC members during group meetings, in her individual teaching reflections, and in her one-on-one interviews. To
illustrate Macey’s experiences with the *Culture of Collaboration*, I have created a diagram for each sub-theme. Each diagram identifies Macey’s perception of the sub-theme at the beginning of the PLC experience as described in her first PLC reflection. Next, Macey’s experiences of the sub-theme are indicated in her interactions with other PLC members during group meetings. Finally, Macey’s summative reflections of each sub-theme are given; these summations are derived from Macey’s final writing reflections upon completing the PLC experience.

Figures 3.2, 3.3, and 3.4 depict Macey’s experiences with idea-sharing, problem-solving, and receiving moral support through the duration of this PLC study.

Figure 3.2 Macey’s Experiences with the Sub-Theme, Idea-Sharing
Prior to participating in this PLC study, Macey was asked to identify people who have influenced her philosophy for teaching writing and people from whom she has received teaching ideas. Macey cited two of her professors. Interestingly, she is not currently taking a course with either of these professors. One, the composition director, was the instructor of the practicum course Macey completed a year ago; the other was Macey’s undergraduate professor three years ago. That Macey should name her former instructors as influential is not surprising. Many educators and researchers suggest teachers’ own learning experiences as students can powerfully shape their future teaching ideas, philosophies, and practices (Lortie, 2002; Grossman, 1998). Lortie (2002) defines this phenomenon as the “apprenticeship of observation.” Grossman (1990) describes the apprenticeship of observation as, “Many…teachers’ ideas of how to teach particular topics can be traced back to their memories of how their own teachers approached these topics” (p.10). For Macey, the apprenticeship of observation largely influences her pedagogical beliefs and practices at the beginning of this study.

It is interesting to note that Macey refers to teachers from her past rather than citing her current colleagues, scholarly articles she has recently read, or her own pedagogical beliefs as the sources for her teaching ideas. Macey’s Pre-PLC responses indicate her teaching beliefs are not currently being influenced by composition theories or pedagogical theories, which suggests she is not enrolled in composition or education courses. Macey’s responses also indicate she is not gleaning teaching ideas from her colleagues.” Her responses suggest she does not
actively participate in a teaching community. Instead, she looks to her past learning experiences to generate pedagogical theories and practices. Her “apprenticeship of observation” is problematic for several reasons.

First, Macey’s memories will most likely fade over time. As Macey continues in her teaching career, she may have difficulty remembering specific lessons or teaching strategies she experienced in the past. Second, teaching strategies used in the past may not reflect current research in education and the content area being taught. As indicated in the apprenticeship of observation model, novice teachers tend to “teach the way they were taught” (Marshall, Smith, & Schaafsma, 1997, p. 249). Third, relying on memories of past teachers gives Macey a skewed picture of how teachers design and facilitate student learning. Teaching, after all, is a complex activity, involving preparation of materials, knowledge of assessment standards, content-level understanding, and classroom management (Lortie, 2002). Much of the teachers do to prepare a lesson does not take place within the classroom. Instructors like Macey, who insist on teaching exactly like their mentors, may simply mimic a teacher’s lesson plan without truly understanding the mentor teacher’s complex process of planning, assessment, and reflection.

This leads directly into the third way in which apprenticeship of observation can be problematic for novice instructors: Teaching is a contextual act. That is, each educational situation is unique; a particular lesson may be successful in one setting or for one group of students, but the same lesson may be unsuccessful in other contexts. According to a study performed by Marshall et al. (1997) on the preparation of
preservice instructors, much current research and discussions of teaching focus on evaluation—determining what makes a “good,” “effective,” or “uninspired” lesson (p. 50). Instead of evaluating teaching, Marshall et al. (1997) propose viewing pedagogical strategies as “the classroom enactments of interpretive theories that are contestable and contested” (p. 50). Their view of teaching is contextual; an instructor’s lesson is not inherently “good” or “bad.” Rather, each lesson represents an instructor’s interpretation of pedagogical theories in addition to his/her enactment of those theories in real classroom context. By clinging to her past professors’ models of instruction, Macey is not interpreting pedagogical theories herself. Instead, she is transferring a past learning situation into a current teaching situation.

Macey’s reliance on the apprenticeship of observation model, however, began to dissipate as she participated in PLC group meetings. During these meetings, she did not refer to her past professors or learning experiences, and she enthusiastically commented on other instructors’ teaching ideas, expressing a desire to try her peers’ ideas in her own class. Macey’s interest in other instructors’ teaching ideas extended beyond these “in the moment” conversations held during group meetings. In her post-PLC reflection, she stated plans for changing her course syllabus and accommodating some of her PLC member’s teaching ideas and assignments. The following semester, Macey created a new, month-long research project based on ideas and feedback from her peers.

For Macey, the concept of idea-sharing involved more than simply exchanging lesson plans with a group of instructors. Participating in this PLC
profoundly changed Macey's approach to generating teaching ideas. Instead of basing her teaching beliefs and practices solely on the apprenticeship of observation model, Macey gathered teaching ideas from her peers. Her peers' ideas, then, were current, targeted to a common student population, and based on programmatic learning goals. Further, her peers' ideas were comprised of lessons, assignments, and activities that Macey had not personally experienced as a student. By accepting these new ideas, Macey accepted a new pedagogical approach. She no longer allowed her own learning experiences to solely define her teaching practices. In short, idea-sharing led to innovation: Macey is looking to the present, rather than the past, for inspiration.

Figure 3.3 Macey's Experiences with the Sub-Theme, Problem-Solving
A second sub-theme that emerged within *The Culture of Collaboration* was problem-solving. Like the other PLC members, Macey admitted that, in the past, she usually solved classroom problems by seeking advice from the first-year composition program director. This response echoes Macey’s earlier approach to generating classroom ideas. In both situations, Macey turned to her mentor, her past professor. During the semester in which Macey participated in the PLC, she did not seek any problem-solving advice from the program director or another professor. Instead, she regularly turned to her peers for teaching advice.

Over the span of three PLC group meetings, Macey asked for problem-solving advice six times. I believe both the number of problems and the range of these problems’ severity hold significance. First, Macey asked for advice on multiple occasions. Prior to participating in the PLC, Macey sought teaching advice only once during her three semesters as an instructor. Her choice to not seek others’ guidance, however, did not mean her classroom was free of problems. Macey admitted that in past semesters, she tried to handle teaching issues on her own because she didn’t want to “bother” the program director. I asked Macey to explain what she meant by this statement. She explained that she did not personally know the current, interim writing director. As a result, she did not feel comfortable approaching the interim director with her classroom problems. Since she was in her second year of teaching, Macey felt like she should have “a better handle” on her class. She thought the interim director was probably busy helping the first-year instructors, who probably needed more help.
Macey also did not seek help from fellow GTAs because many of them had accused her of spending "too much time teaching and not enough time being a writer." In short, Macey was not part of a community that accepted her desire to grow as a teacher and offered her help when teaching problems arose. Macey’s experience echoes research findings on the psychological impact of teaching environments on teachers. Schools are often described as “egg-crates,” a structure which physically and mentally separates teachers from one another (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2009; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 2009). In such a workplace setting, many teachers experience psychological isolation from other adults (Sarason, 1996). Such isolation prevents teachers from sharing new ideas with one another (Lortie, 2002). An “egg-crate” workplace may also prevent teachers from building supportive relationships with colleagues; teachers, then, work independently, rather than collectively, to solve classroom problems.

Conversely, collaborative work environments provide teachers with “emotional support and encouragement” (Wildman & Niles, 1987). When teachers work closely with colleagues they know and trust, they are more likely to seek advice and help. For Macey, participation in the PLC profoundly changed her approach to problem-solving classroom issues. While she did not feel comfortable asking the writing program director or other GTAs for help, Macey did discuss a wide range of teaching issues with her PLC group. The classroom problems she discussed included handling students’ behavioral issues, teaching certain concepts within the shared curriculum, and confronting students about suspected plagiarism.
Macey sought her PLC members’ advice concerning students’ behaviors three times and advice on a plagiarized paper once. When describing these problems to the other PLC members, Macey appeared to be under emotional stress. Her hands were shaking and her tone of voice indicated she was upset about her recent encounters with her students. Considering Macey’s visible emotional distress, she seemed to view these as “crisis” situations. Later in the semester, Macey asked PLC members for pedagogical advice two times. In both cases, she wanted advice on how to teach a specific concept within the curriculum (i.e. MLA citation, thesis statements, etc.). These pedagogy-related questions were not “emergency” or “crisis” situations. Macey did not appear visibly upset with these situations; she simply wanted to learn new teaching strategies.

That Macey felt comfortable turning to her peers in “crisis” and “non-crisis” situations is significant. In the past, Macey had only sought advice when she felt she was in a “teaching emergency.” With her PLC group, however, Macey regularly asked for help, whether she was dealing with a student’s behavior or she was struggling with daily lesson plans. Both the range in severity of these teaching problems and the frequency with which she admitted these problems evidence Macey’s trust in her peers’ support. Hord (2008) describes this type of collaborative relationship as, “...the development of positive attitudes, respect, and high regard across all staff members...Trust is a significant factor for the community” (p. 12). Macey’s willingness to be vulnerable with her peers directly relates to the third sub-theme within The Culture of Collaboration: Moral Support.
A lot of the graduate students I have met...the writers want to be writers, not teachers. ...Whereas I have always wanted to be a teacher.

I feel like I'm in an awkward position [with other graduate students] because I like to teach and I like to talk about my teaching with other people.

Macey, I think you did well [handling a classroom crisis] under the circumstances.

Macey, don't get too discouraged. We've all had students with behavior issues.

Macey, you're not alone. I had a similar problem happen in my class last week...

Innovation and change are very important to developing pedagogy. Meeting regularly and talking about what other people are doing in the classroom provides a sense of accountability that cannot exist in a vacuum.

I felt like I was teaching in a vacuum before doing the PLC. Nobody knew what I was doing. That's sort of scary.

Figure 3.4 Macey's Experiences with the Sub-Theme, Receiving Moral Support

As illustrated in Figure 3.4, Macey refers to her pre-PLC work environment as "awkward." She feels different from her peers in the MFA program because she hopes to become a professor of undergraduate students at a small, liberal arts college. If she attains this job, she will most likely teach first-year composition and other introductory courses. Therefore, Macey feels it is important to "take teaching composition seriously" and participate in professional development. She views her current teaching assignments as learning opportunities in her long-term career goal. According to Macey, many of her peers in the MFA program do not seem to share her teaching aspirations; therefore, she senses her peers are not interested in sharing teaching ideas, practices, or resources.
Macey’s experience is not meant to represent the experience of every novice instructor at every postsecondary institution. In fact, many first-year writing programs require GTAs to participate in peer mentoring groups for one or more years of their teaching experience (Barr-Ebest, 2002; Broz, 2002; Rose, S., 2002; Weiser, 2002; Wilhoit, 2002). In such peer mentoring programs, novice instructors may work one-on-one with a more experienced instructor, or instructors may work in small peer groups. The goal of these programs is for experienced GTAs to share their pedagogical knowledge with their peers, which may be accomplished through workshops, meetings, and/or class observations.

Scholars note that both mentors and protégés benefit from such mentoring relationships. First, protégés receive support from their mentors, who serve as a personal role model and a consultant/advisor (Schmidt & Wolfe, 2009). As a role model, the mentor exhibits skills worthy of imitation (Schmidt & Wolfe, 2009). For example, within the PLC group, Macey often turned to her peers for advice on handling students with behavioral problems. She admitted to not being a “stern teacher,” and she admired her peers’ “authoritative philosophies.” Being exposed to the teaching philosophies of the PLC group members as well as their “authoritative” practices caused Macey to reflect on her own teaching beliefs and practices. In these interactions among PLC group members, Macey’s peers served as her role models and as her advisors by exhibiting teaching qualities worth imitating and offering teaching advice as needed.
Interestingly, the PLC members were not “assigned” to be Macey’s role models. In fact, one of the group members possessed fewer years of teaching experience than Macey did. Yet, mentors do not always need to be “assigned” in order perform a mentoring role. Schmidt and Wolfe (2009) explain, “Role models may or may not be aware the newcomers regard them in that fashion” (p. 372). In other words, mentoring relationships may, at times, develop from the protégé’s need rather than from programmatic design.

As a protégé, Macey also benefitted from the moral support she received from her PLC mentors. Moral support and encouragement is vital for a protégé to preserve a healthy self-image while conforming to a new professional self-image (Schmidt and Wolfe, 2009). Prior to participating in the PLC, Macey admitted to feeling “awkward” among other GTAs. Her self-image as a teacher seemed to clash with the creative-writer-image other GTAs portrayed. Within PLC meetings, however, Macey received positive feedback from her peers, such as “you’re not alone” and “you handled that situation well.” These positive comments reaffirmed Macey’s personal, and professional, self-images as a teacher.

Finally, serving as role models and advisors may also benefit Macey’s mentors. Schmidt and Wolfe (2009) maintain, “Personally, the mentor may derive satisfaction in witnessing the protégé advance within the profession” (p. 379). In addition to feeling satisfied or encouraged by Macey’s success, her mentors may expand their teaching expertise. When GTAs serve as mentors, they apply their pedagogical content knowledge differently than they would in a classroom. Weiser
(2002) explains, "As mentors, they find themselves having to generalize from their own experiences and to find ways to apply what they have learned...They have to theorize their practice" (p.46). Mentor relationships, then, are valuable for the professional development of mentors and protégés.

In short, working within a supportive community diminishes an instructor's sense of isolation. Regular, close contact with peers allows instructors, such as Macey, to be held accountable for their teaching practices. Instructors in mentoring relationships are also likely to develop healthy self-images due to their exposure to positive role models, relevant teaching advice, and encouraging feedback. One way of describing this type of collaborative culture found within Professional Learning Communities is as a "teaching-learning process" (DuFour, 2004, p. 9). In such a culture, teachers serve as mentors and as protégés. They willingly offer advice and practical resources to peers who seek assistance; teachers also learn from their peers by accepting help and ideas, as needed.

The *Culture of Collaboration* is first PLC principle analyzed in this study. Chapter Three primarily investigates the *Culture of Collaboration* by analyzing instructors' relationships with one another within the PLC. However, the second PLC principle, instructor professional development, is briefly mentioned in Macey's case study. Chapter Four provides an in-depth study of instructor professional development. In this chapter, I will analyze instructors' reflections and teaching portfolios, indicating how, and in what ways, instructors believed their confidence and expertise in pedagogical content knowledge was affected by the PLC experience.
CHAPTER IV
INSTRUCTORS' PEDAGOGICAL CONTENT KNOWLEDGE GROWTH:
A FOCUS ON RESULTS

Defining “A Focus on Results”

One core principle defining the traditional Professional Learning Community model is A Focus on Results. According to this principle, PLC members judge the effectiveness of their community on tangible results (DuFour, 2004). That is, a true PLC is not considered “successful” simply when teachers meet within a Culture of Collaboration to share teaching resources and ideas. Teacher collaboration must be focused on a goal; this goal is connected to tangible results; and once desired results are achieved, a new goal is created. Here, the term “results” refers to tangible data evidencing student learning; this data is determined by the PLC members and may include national or local assessment methods. For example, a PLC may set a goal of improving students’ standardized test scores in a specific content area, improving students’ performance on a common assessment created by a school district, or improving students’ grade point average in a specific subject. Members within a PLC, then, participate in an ongoing process of identifying goals, working together to achieve designated goals, and assessing results based on tangible evidence of student achievement (DuFour, 2004).

In designing the PLC model for this study, I kept the following “traditional” PLC core principles in tact: Ensuring Students Learn, A Culture of Collaboration,
and *A Focus on Results*. It is important to note, however, that I slightly modified the third principle, *A Focus on Results*, from its use in DuFour and Eaker’s (1998) original PLC structure.

*A Focus on Results in the traditional PLC.*

In the traditional model, *A Focus on Results* refers to PLC members’ collaborative effort to improve student achievement. DuFour (2004) describes this principle as

Each teacher team participates in an ongoing process of identifying the current level of student achievement, establishing a goal to improve the current level, working together to achieve that goal, and providing periodic evidence of progress” (p. 10).

Within this traditional PLC model, teachers embody the *Focus on Results* principle in three ways. Teachers work collaboratively to set student learning goals; they share resources and methods for teaching those goals; and they collect data evidencing student achievement of those goals.

DuFour, DuFour and Eaker (2005) recommend PLC members focus on student achievement by establishing “SMART” goals. SMART goals are defined as being strategic and specific, measurable, attainable, results-oriented, and time-bound (O’Neill & Conzemius, 2000). For example, a PLC team might set a SMART goal of increasing the number of students who achieve a target score on a common assessment by the end of a semester or school year. In order to measure if this SMART goal is achieved, PLC members devise assessments and teaching strategies
as well as share the tangible results of student learning (i.e. standardized test scores or common assessment results). Within a traditional PLC, then, success is measured when collective team goals are attained.

This focus on result-oriented goals is a key factor, which distinguishes the PLC from other learning communities. For example, many scholars write about learning communities at both the K-12 and postsecondary levels (Baker, 1999; Barr & Tagg, 1995; Christensen, Garvin, and Sweet, 1991; Gabelnick, MacGregor, Mathews, and Smith, 1990; Lardner & Malnarich, 2008; Tinto, Love, & Russo, 1994). Generally speaking, these scholars define a “learning community” as a small group of students, teachers, and/or administrators, in which all members are engaged in learning; within this group, both individual and group learning are valued (Baker, 1999). Scholars agree that successful learning communities require members to collaborate on setting goals, solving problems, sharing knowledge, and offering one another support. However, the learning communities described here are not focused on specific, tangible, goals. That is, these learning communities generally aim to increase student retention, student engagement in a collaborative form of learning, and student academic achievement (Lardner & Malnarich, 2008, p. 34). These learning communities, then, are based on a general goal. Conversely, the PLC is structured to meet strategic, measurable, attainable, results-oriented, time-bound goals (SMART goals) connected to student learning. The PLC model, then, focuses on tangible results to gauge its success.
A Focus on Results in this study’s PLC.

This study’s focus on results-oriented goals related to instructor professional growth within the PLC context demonstrates a departure from the traditional PLC model in two significant ways. First, the PLC in this study does not focus on student achievement. Second, the PLC in this study addresses a gap in current research regarding the professional development of first-year composition instructors.

The traditional PLC model’s focus on student learning is not well suited to this educational setting for the following reasons. First, unlike the typical K-12 educational setting, this postsecondary setting does not utilize common assessments to measure student achievement. At the K-12 level, student achievement is regularly measured at the national and state levels by standardized tests; student achievement is also monitored by local school districts and individual schools through common exams and rubrics designed by teachers. Finally, these assessments performed at the national, state, and local levels conform to national and state standards for student learning in each content area. These standards are created by nationally accredited organizations, such as The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), The International Reading Association (IRA), The National Education Association (NEA), The American Federation of Teachers (AFT), and The National Council of Teachers of Math (NCTM). The purpose of these standards is to ensure that all K-12 students receive a consistent education, from school to school and state to state, by providing educators with clear, detailed guidelines on what skills and knowledge students need to learn at each grade level and in each core content area.
At many postsecondary institutions, student learning goals are not typically defined in the same degree of detail as in K-12 setting. For example, Standards for the English Language Arts (1996) is a book-length text which describes the twelve common core standards created by NCTE/IRA for K-12 English educators; this text also offers detailed sample lesson plans, reading lists, assignments, and assessments to help educators implement these common standards into their curricula and classroom activities. In turn, students are then assessed on their understanding of these standards by individual instructors, through state-level standardized tests, and through national standardized tests.

At the postsecondary level, however, student learning goals are most commonly created by individual institutions rather by national organizations. That is, administrators and instructors within academic departments create student learning goals tailored to specific majors, minors, certification fields, and/or individual courses rather than tied to state or national standards. In fact, no detailed common standards exist for postsecondary English education similar to the K-12 level's NCTE/IRA Standards for the English Language Arts. The only set of student learning outcomes within the field of English studies at the postsecondary level is The WPA Outcome Statement for First-Year Composition (2000). This outcome statement, created by the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA), lists five areas of knowledge and skills students enrolled in first-year composition courses ought to learn. Unlike the NCTE/IRA Standards for the English Language Arts, which are published in a detailed, book-length text, the WPA Outcome Statement is both brief and general.
First published in *WPA: Writing Program Administrator*, this outcome statement is two pages long; each outcome statement is followed by a short list of suggested methods for instructors to teach the outcome. The WPA Outcome Statement authors assert that this brief, general approach is intentional; they state, “This document intentionally defines only ‘outcomes,’ or types of results, and not ‘standards,’ or precise levels of achievement. The setting of standards should be left to specific institutions or specific groups of institutions” (Council of Writing Program Administrators, 2000). As indicated in this statement by WPA, student achievement at the postsecondary level is measured only by local institutions and local instructors; national organizations and national assessments are not used to determine standards for teaching or measuring student achievement.

Within this PLC study, the first-year composition program is based on eight student learning outcomes created by the Writing Program Administrator (see Appendix F). Similar to the WPA Outcome Statement, these learning outcomes describe general rhetorical knowledge, research skills, and writing skills students should learn within their first-year composition course. Instructors of these first-year composition courses, however, are not required to explicitly teach these outcomes using a prescribed curriculum, common writing projects, or specific lesson plans. Further, this program does not require instructors to use common assessments for assessing student achievement. Instead, individual instructors decide how, and in what ways, to teach and assess their students’ learning.
Student learning goals at the postsecondary level, then, are generally not as clearly defined as they are at the K-12 educational level. In Chapter Five, I will provide an in-depth analysis of these two educational settings, detailing how an institution's mission, vision, and value statements related to student assessment affect instructors' beliefs and practices regarding student achievement. Chapter Four, therefore, will not focus on student achievement; this chapter will not adhere to the traditional PLC model, in which instructors and administrators define "results" as data collected from common assessments and standardized tests. In future studies, focusing on student achievement could be a possible outcome for a first-year composition PLC. However, as a researcher, my primary goal in investigating this PLC is to determine how, and in what ways, this model might promote instructors’ professional growth. More specifically, I am interested in learning how the PLC might develop instructors' pedagogical content knowledge, or the beliefs and practices instructors hold for teaching a particular content area. In this chapter, I will provide a detailed description of the concept, pedagogical content knowledge. In short, this chapter will focus on the following research questions.

In what ways does working within the PLC model affect participants' competence in the teaching of first-year composition?

- To what extent can the PLC develop instructors' pedagogical content knowledge?
- How do instructors describe the experience of working in the PLC?
- How do instructors perceive their confidence and expertise in pedagogical content knowledge after experiencing the PLC?
By focusing on instructor learning, rather than student learning, the PLC used in this study not only differs from the traditional K-12 PLC model. This PLC is also markedly different from other learning communities used within the postsecondary educational setting.

Learning communities within universities typically involve grouping first-year students in shared schedules across disciplinary boundaries. This structuring of the students' time and learning experiences is intentional, so cohorts of students might build community and form bonds with other students and faculty (Gabelnick et al. 1990). One education scholar, Angelo (1999), explains, “Through course work and meetings, students learn academic content and the learning and group process skills needed for the shift from an individualistic to a cooperative academic culture” (p. 111). The goal of these communities, then, is to promote individual student learning through collaborative support.

Angelo (1999) and other scholars (Baker, 1999; Barr & Tagg, 1995; Christensen, et al. 1991) give much attention to the effects learning communities have on students. These effects include student retention, curricular coherence, student involvement in other campus activities, and social connectedness (Smith, 2001). Scholars also suggest these learning communities can be beneficial for participating instructors. For example, Lardner and Manlnarich's study (2009) reports that faculty members who participate in collaborative, interdisciplinary assessments within their learning communities feel their curriculum has coherence and their teaching assignments and assessments are more fully developed (p. 34). B. Smith (2001)
affirms the important role learning communities can play in supporting instructors’ professional growth. She asserts, “Learning communities can be a powerful faculty development structure…that can lead to genuine growth and development” (Smith, B., 2001, p. 7). While many scholars believe learning communities positively affect instructors’ teaching practices and relationships with other faculty members, current research does not yet provide an in-depth analysis of how these communities specifically promote instructors’ professional pedagogical growth. In fact, in a 2003 study assessing learning community programs nationwide, Taylor, Moore, MacGregor and Linblad (2003) argue, “Very little research and assessment on learning communities has explored the effects of these programs on the faculty…who serve on learning community teaching teams” (iii).

**Instructor professional growth: A gap in the literature.**

Lardner and Malnarich (2009) consider the scarcity of research on faculty development “a gap” in the learning community literature (p. 30). This gap may exist because early proponents of learning communities assumed that when instructors share curricula, they also share teaching strategies and resources, resulting in increased pedagogical awareness and growth (Lardner & Malnarich, 2009). Recent research proves, however, that the learning community structure itself does not automatically result in instructors’ professional growth. For example, B. Smith (2001) asserts, “Learning communities across the nation are under-investing in faculty development. So it isn’t surprising that pedagogical approaches have changed little” (p.2).
If these learning communities are meant to promote instructors’ professional growth as well as student achievement, intentional focus and resources must be placed on the instructors’ participation in these communities. Just recently, scholars are recognizing the need for further research in the role learning communities play in instructor development (Boix-Mansilla, 2007; Lardner & Malnarich, 2008; Lardner & Malnarich; 2008/2009; B. Smith, 2001; Taylor et al. 2003). The importance of such research is best described by Taylor et al. (2003) as,

These teaching teams are themselves “learning communities” of professionals collaborating on behalf of improved curricula and greater student learning and success; the quality and sustainability of these initiatives depend on the communities of practice that emerge around them. The small number of dissertations that have focused on the role of learning community teaching in faculty development and vitality indicate that this is a promising arena for future study (p. iii).

One goal of this dissertation, then, is to focus on faculty development within a learning community model. More specifically, this study analyzes the PLC model, not simply as a means for ensuring student learning, but as a means for promoting instructor professional growth. Therefore, instructor learning is designated as a results-oriented goal for this study.
**A Focus on Results:** Measuring professional growth.

According to the traditional model, a PLC is successful when it realizes its goal. In designing this study, I created a specific, measurable, attainable, results-oriented, and time-bound goal by structuring my research question and data collection methods in the following ways.

**Overarching Research Question:** *In what ways does working within the PLC model affect participants' competence in the teaching of first-year composition?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SMART Component</th>
<th>Goal of this Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Specific</strong></td>
<td>This study specifically analyzes instructors' pedagogical content knowledge in the teaching of writing. (Pedagogical content knowledge = theoretical beliefs and practical methods for teaching a specific content area, first-year composition).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Measurable</strong></td>
<td>- Instructors' knowledge in content areas outside of composition is not studied (i.e. instructors' theories and beliefs concerning literature or creative writing or other fields in English studies are not analyzed).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attainable</strong></td>
<td>This study “measures” instructors' pedagogical content knowledge in the teaching of composition in two ways.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- <strong>Pre-PLC Assessment:</strong> Instructors' Philosophies for Teaching Writing. (Instructors are asked to explain their beliefs and practices for teaching first-year composition).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- <strong>Post-PLC Assessment:</strong> Instructors' Teaching Portfolios. (In Teaching Portfolios, instructors provide lesson plans, class activities, and student assessments evidencing their pedagogical practices. In these portfolios, instructors analyze student learning and reflect on their teaching practices and beliefs in assessing a focus outcome).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Current research on learning communities suggests instructors may gain pedagogical knowledge and experience professional growth from participating in these models (Boix-Mansilla, 2007; Lardner &amp; Malnarich, 2008; Lardner &amp; Malnarich; 2008/2009; Smith, 2001; Taylor et al. 2003).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The goal of this study (instructors' professional growth) is attainable.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In this chapter, I define the term "pedagogical content knowledge," the specific type of knowledge addressed in this study. I will analyze instructors’ Pre-PLC pedagogical content knowledge, as evidenced in their teaching philosophies. Then, by analyzing individual post-PLC reflections and teaching portfolios, I will report to what extent three instructors felt their pedagogical content knowledge was affected by their participation in this PLC.

**Pedagogical Content Knowledge Defined**

First introduced by Shulman (1986), the term “pedagogical content knowledge” refers to the type of knowledge instructors draw upon that is specific to teaching a particular subject matter, such as biology, algebra, or composition. This type of knowledge, then, represents an intersection of subject matter knowledge and general pedagogical knowledge. The concept of pedagogical content knowledge can be traced back to Dewey, who advises new teachers to “psychologize” their subjects for the purpose of teaching (1902/1983). Here, Dewey aptly describes how instructors use pedagogical content knowledge: To consider content within a subject, to consider students’ learning needs, and to consider best practices for teaching.
specific content to specific students. This type of knowledge, then, encompasses an instructor’s complex relationships with students, curricula, and personal teaching beliefs and practices.

The relationship between an instructor and his/her teaching philosophy, methodology, and classroom contexts is best described by Grossman (1990), who argues that pedagogical content knowledge is composed of four interrelated components. These components include: the instructor’s knowledge and beliefs for teaching a particular subject; the instructor’s knowledge of students’ conceptions/misconceptions of a subject matter; the instructor’s curricular knowledge; and the instructor’s knowledge of instructional strategies (Grossman, 1990, p.8). These four interrelated components of pedagogical content knowledge are displayed in Figure 4.2.

![Figure 4.2 Four Interrelated Components of Pedagogical Content Knowledge](image-url)
In addition to Grossman and Shulman, several other scholars (Dewey, 1902; Lortie, 1975; Kerr, 1981; Wilson, 1988) and NCATE (1997) have recognized the value of pedagogical content knowledge for instructor professional development. This type of knowledge among instructors is valuable because it is specific and directly connected to classroom practice. Pedagogical content knowledge, unlike general pedagogical knowledge, encompasses an instructor’s assumptions, beliefs, and practices for teaching a particular subject matter rather than teaching in general. Pedagogical content knowledge also goes beyond a theoretical understanding of content-area knowledge. That is, pedagogical content knowledge refers to an instructor’s ability to teach a subject rather than to theorize or research that subject. In reality, theoretical knowledge, general pedagogical knowledge, and pedagogical content knowledge are not easily separated; these types of knowledge often interrelated and inseparable.

Therefore, while the goal of this study is to analyze instructors’ pedagogical content knowledge and to determine how instructors’ participation in the PLC affected such knowledge, I readily admit that “measuring” such professional growth is not an exact, quantifiable process. To determine instructors’ baseline knowledge, I collected their philosophies for teaching writing prior to attending our first PLC group meeting. Before analyzing these teaching philosophies, however, it is important to note ways in which these instructors fit the “typical profile” of first-year composition graduate teaching assistants (GTAs). That is, is important to consider factors
contributing to how GTAs have historically developed pedagogical content knowledge in the teaching of first-year composition.

Unlike K-12 educators, who spend years acquiring general pedagogical knowledge, subject-matter knowledge, and pedagogical content knowledge through coursework, internships, and ongoing professional development workshops, many first-year composition GTAs are often hired as instructors with little, if any, educational background or teaching experience. In the past thirty years, the field of composition studies has made progress in providing new instructors with some degree of pedagogical training and support.

For example, Latterall’s (1996) survey of first-year composition programs shows that almost all participating institutions provide new instructors with an orientation prior to their first teaching position. This orientation is then followed by a semester- or year-long practicum course. Finally, many first-year composition instructors are then supported by some form of mentoring following their completion of the practicum (Barr Ebest, 2002; Broz, 2002; Dobrin, 2005; Latterall, 1996; Pytlik & Liggett, 2002; Weisner, 2002; Yancey, 2002). That so many first-year writing programs provide pedagogical training to new instructors suggests the field of composition studies values both the content of this course and the methods used to teach it.

However, this progress in the training of composition instructors is not complete. Weiser (2002) aptly sums up how new, and still evolving, the teacher education process is within the field of composition studies:
I simply want to remind us of how recently we've begun to take seriously the preparation of new teachers of writing, of how recently most universities have acted upon the belief that anyone who could write well enough to be in graduate school in English could teach writing without any instruction or support (p. 40).

Like Wesier, many other composition scholars concur (Dobrin, 2005; Long et al., 1996; Marshall, 2004; Rose, 2002; Tremmel & Broz, 2002; Yancey, 2002) that providing pedagogical support and training to new instructors is a very real, ongoing need.

As indicated by many composition scholars, GTAs have historically been hired to teach composition in an apprentice role. This model becomes problematic as "...apprenticeship implies a rigid differential in status and power between master and apprentice: the apprentice is bound to serve the master, with the payoff for his/her labor being the learning of a trade" (Long et al., 1996, p. 68). Here, GTAs are always cast in the role of recipient: receiving knowledge and training from the expert. The GTAs are perceived as not holding disciplinary or pedagogical expertise; therefore, they cannot truly collaborate with WPAs or other faculty. This model holds serious implications for the status GTAs hold within a department. As Long et al. (1996) insist, "Perhaps the most problematic effect of the apprentice model is that it continually reproduces 'TAs' rather than colleagues" (p. 70). That is, GTAs are not equal shareholders in their educational community. They are, as Campbell describes, an "academic proletariat" (Berlin, 1987, p. 90).
This structure not only imparts a low status on incoming GTAs, it also can detrimentally affect their continued development as instructors. Within this model, GTAs generally learn composition theories and pedagogies from a single “master” or administrator, thus limiting their exposure to strategies, assumptions, and methods for teaching writing. Further, these instructors may passively accept all of their “master’s” philosophies, never reflecting on their own ideas, experiences, and practices. Long et al. (1996) maintain that “By de-emphasizing the need for the teacher to theorize his or her own teaching...the apprenticeship model, in effect, ratifies research as an intellectual act and teaching as a mechanical one” (p. 71).

The fact remains that most GTAs are not rhetoric and composition specialists and do not possess prior educational experiences or training. The current model of instructor professionalization (an orientation and practicum course) undermines the complexity of professional growth. Currently, no in-depth research exists detailing how the professionalization process occurs, what instructors experience as growing professionals, and how a WPA might support instructors’ growth. Such an in-depth look at instructor growth is one goal of this study. This study will shed light on the ways first-year composition instructors obtain pedagogical content knowledge, and how this knowledge is affected by their participation in a development model (the PLC), which places them as equal shareholders in their professional growth.
In this section, I have listed excerpts from each instructor’s teaching philosophy. These philosophies were collected prior to instructors’ participation in this study’s PLC. Following each philosophy, I have included a brief analysis of each instructor’s pre-PLC pedagogical content knowledge.

Macey’s teaching philosophy.

_I like to present my course as a space for creative and academic exploration._

*I try to foster an environment that is less pressure-filled than what students may be used to. My overarching goal is to encourage students to take an active role in their education, to approach their academic work with fervor and to take pride in the products. I’ve had two professors who have influenced my teaching philosophy. They were both really different, but they both had the perfect balance between discussion and lecture. As a student, they made me feel comfortable._

According to Grossman (1990), there are several sources from which instructors may construct their pedagogical content knowledge. These sources include prior learning experiences as students, prior teaching experiences, prior professional education courses, and instructors’ own disciplinary knowledge (Grossman, 1990, p. 10). As evidenced in Macey’s teaching philosophy, the most significant source of pedagogical content knowledge is her prior learning experiences. In particular, Macey lists two prior professors and their teaching practices as being highly influential. Lortie (2002) describes the time prospective teachers spend in the classroom as students as an “apprenticeship of observation.” That is, many novice
teachers' beliefs and practices for teaching a specific subject are traced to their memories of a past teacher's pedagogical practices.

Chapter Three of this dissertation traces Macey's apprenticeship of observation; this chapter gives a detailed account of how Macey used the apprenticeship of observation model to develop her teaching ideas and problem-solving practices at the beginning of her PLC experience. Just as Macey used this model to develop her teaching practices, she also relied upon the apprenticeship of observation model to formulate her teaching philosophy. This model, as discussed further in Chapter Three, offers new instructors a limited foundation for developing pedagogical content knowledge.

Scholars such as Grossman (1990) and Lortie (2002) suggest that instructors who enact an apprenticeship of observation simply mimic past instructors' practices without critically analyzing the pedagogical assumptions guiding those practices. Lortie (2002) explains,

It is improbable that many students learn to see teaching in an ends-means frame or that they normally take an analytic stance toward it. Students are undoubtedly impressed by some teacher actions and not by others, but one would not expect them to view the differences in a pedagogical, explanatory way. What students learn about teaching, then, is intuitive and imitative rather than explicit and analytical; it is based on individual personalities rather than on pedagogical principles (p.62).
Novice instructors, then, typically use the apprenticeship of observation model, as they reflect upon their own experiences as students and attempt to emulate the “best” teaching practices they remember experiencing. If novice instructors, however, solely turn to past experiences to determine current practices, they typically do not reflect or critically analyze their teaching beliefs and methods. The apprenticeship of observation, therefore, is an insufficient means for developing pedagogical content knowledge. In order to develop a rich, contextualized philosophy for teaching composition, Macey needs to analyze, rather than simply imitate, pedagogical theories and practices.

**Beth’s teaching philosophy.**

*I believe in a very practical, hands-on approach to teaching writing. By that, I mean making the writing as relevant to the students’ majors or make it general enough that it’s a one-size-fits-all. It is my responsibility to give them the tools to become better writers and offer them choices in their writing topics and genres. By giving them a practical, hands-on, choice-orientated class, I allow students to apply their writing to their major, make choices for themselves, and build on skills they can take to other classes in their degree...My philosophy has evolved from my internships and my teaching methods classes. Because I have an English education background, I believe in using quizzes, student reflections, and formative/summative assessments in my class.*

Unlike Macey, who relies solely on prior learning experiences to define her teaching philosophy, Beth cites her undergraduate teacher education program as a
major influence. From her professional coursework, Beth has learned how to incorporate specific strategies into her classroom, such as quizzes and assessments. From her teaching internships, she has gained hands-on experiences using these pedagogical strategies. Such professional coursework and experience, Grossman maintains (1990), can attribute to a novice instructor's pedagogical content knowledge. However, very little research exists documenting the content of subject-specific methods courses and the relationship between these courses and prospective teachers' development of pedagogical content knowledge. Theoretically, these methods courses should provide prospective teachers with pedagogical resources and the ability to critically analyze their teaching beliefs and practices. In reality, no data confirms that methods courses achieve these two goals. Teacher education programs alone, then, cannot ensure new instructors, such as Beth, are able to develop adequate pedagogical content knowledge.

**Ben's teaching philosophy.**

*Philosophy is the pursuit of truth using logic and evidence, but I’m not sure that teaching writing can be broken into a scientific formula. We are all different in how we prefer to pursue knowledge. I approach the classroom with this in mind, and try to empathize this with my students. At the beginning of each class, I have them inform me of their past experiences with writing and try to let these responses give me a sense at the best way to dictate the material to them. I am also concerned with tapping into their natural curiosity, because we won’t retain anything unless we are curious and passionate about the knowledge we’re seeking. As a creative writer, I*
get excited about the idea of "genre," and I want my students to play around with different genres and be creative. My class is designed for students to put thoughts into a formula and then break the formula for their unique thinking. It allows them to become individual writers as opposed to fitting into a formula.

It is quite evident in Ben's teaching philosophy that his disciplinary background plays a key role in his development of pedagogical content knowledge. Ben, a masters-level student specializing in creative writing, views his composition classroom as a place where students tap into "their natural curiosity," "play around with different genres," "be creative," "break the formula," and "become individual writers." Ben views his students as individuals with the potential for creating unique, creative ideas; he values creativity over formulaic writing. Ben's creative writing background and knowledge of the creative writing discipline have shaped his conception of what it means to teach composition.

Grossman (1990) argues that disciplinary knowledge not only affects an instructor's teaching beliefs, it can also affect an instructor's "selection and sequencing of curricula" (p. 12). This seems to hold true for Ben. When designing curriculum for his composition course, he describes the students' writing projects as "a pyramid." At the base of the pyramid are the students' thoughts and ideas; the base is where Ben spends most of his teaching efforts. Ben sees the tip of the pyramid as "grammar and all the little details." He spends much less time teaching grammar or other conventions of writing. Instead, his class time is devoted to writing workshops and discussions, so that students might develop their individual ideas.
For Ben, his creative writing background, then, dramatically affects his course design and teaching practices. His pedagogical content knowledge, however, is limited to his disciplinary knowledge: the teaching of creative writing. In order to develop his pedagogical content knowledge, Ben needs to critically analyze his teaching practices and beliefs and learn how to contextualize his pedagogical knowledge for his first-year composition course.

**Chris’ teaching philosophy.**

*I believe that there is no greater instrument than literature with which to confront our assumptions and prejudices about the world around us. Teaching the language of critical discourse and the application of such terms to reading, writing, and exploration of rhetoric serves to make students more productive citizens in the world around them...* I encourage self-exploration through writing and teach respect for the self-exploration of others. By sharing in the writing process, and by identifying personal strengths and weaknesses, students can see how their strengths serve their community and how they can find solutions to the hurdles of their writing through their peers. I want to focus on student strengths because I have seen this philosophy work within the Montessori schools. If you put a lot of energy into students’ strengths, they can be brilliant; they can really do something beyond expectations.

Similar to Ben, Chris is highly influenced by her disciplinary background. As a masters-level student specializing in literature and political science, Chris views the composition course as a venue for analyzing discourse; discussing social, political,
and/or cultural uses of rhetoric; and using the writing process for students’ self-exploration. Her disciplinary background, then, profoundly shapes her knowledge and beliefs on the purpose of teaching first-year composition. Interestingly, Chris turns to a second source for the pedagogical practices she uses within her composition class. In the last two sentences of her philosophy, Chris describes her pedagogical practices as focusing “on student strengths.” Chris learned this pedagogical practice when working for two years as an instructor in a Montessori elementary school.

It is not unusual for Chris to develop her pedagogical content knowledge based on prior teaching experiences, even though these experiences involved teaching a different content-area and grade-level (elementary science/art as opposed to first-year composition). In fact, much research on teacher development acknowledges that teachers (across content areas and grade levels) attribute their teaching knowledge to actual classroom experiences (Howey & Grossman, 1989; Lortie, 1975; Marshall, Smith, & Schaafsma, 1997). Obviously, teaching experiences allow instructors to test-out pedagogical theories with real students; these experiences also help instructors understand students’ conceptions/misconceptions of a particular subject matter. However, learning from prior teaching experience is not a fail-proof method for instructors to develop their pedagogical content knowledge. Grossman (1990) warns, “Learning from experience may focus more on ‘what works’ than on overall goals for instruction” (p. 16). That is, instructors may simply use past experiences to gather an arsenal of “good lessons” or “fun activities” without critically analyzing what students are learning. For Chris to grow as professional educator, she needs to
reflect upon and analyze her prior teaching experiences before deciding how (and if) to implement them into this new teaching context.

**Pedagogical content knowledge and this PLC study.**

As evidenced in these teaching philosophies, all four instructors possessed pedagogical content knowledge that influenced their teaching prior to participating in this PLC. However, their pedagogical content knowledge was incomplete; first, instructors derived their knowledge from a limited (usually single) source. Macey relied on her observations of past instructors; Beth drew her pedagogical knowledge from undergraduate teacher education coursework; Ben used his disciplinary knowledge in creative writing to structure his composition curriculum and class sessions; and Chris based her teaching ideas on her disciplinary knowledge and her teaching practices on her prior experiences.

Second, instructors' philosophies lacked evidence of critical reflection and analysis of teaching beliefs and practices. That is, instructors listed what they believe about teaching composition and how they go about teaching composition. Yet, they made no direct connections between their teaching beliefs and practices; that is, their philosophies did not indicate whether these instructors regularly participated in reflective practice.

It is not surprising these instructors' pedagogical knowledge is incomplete. They are all within their first year or two of teaching and might be viewed as "novice" or "probationary" instructors. Within the K-12 educational setting, NCATE describes the preparation and development of educators as a three-phase process. In
the first phase, the "candidate" or preservice teacher attends an accredited school of education to receive content-area and pedagogical knowledge. Second, the "novice" teacher holds a probationary license and is required to participate in a mentoring program or other professional development activities before being granted a professional license. Finally, teachers who receive their professional license are still expected to engage in ongoing professional development through coursework, workshops, or other professional activities. According to NCATE, then, the process of developing from a novice to a professional instructor is ongoing and requires instructors to continually improve their content area knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and classroom methods.

In reality, many K-12 level instructors meet the requirements of mandated professional development by attending in-service workshops within their local schools, enrolling in continuing education coursework, and attending conferences. Participating in these activities, however, does not describe the process of becoming a professional educator. That is, teachers' pedagogical content knowledge is not automatically altered when they attend an educational workshop or read a journal article. Instead, education scholars believe teachers must be actively engaged in their own professional development. One way teachers may be actively engaged is through reflective practice.
Pedagogical content knowledge and reflective practice.

"Reflective practice" is a term used among many education scholars and practitioners referring to an instructor’s regular, ongoing assessment of his/her teaching practices and/or classroom relationships associated with student learning. First used by Schon (1983), this term is described as, “Through reflective practice a teacher continually considers the effects of instruction on students’ learning, or on whatever other outcomes might be produced through a teaching and learning relationship" (Smagorinsky, 2009, p.21). This type of reflection is complex; it goes beyond simply thinking about “what works” or “what doesn’t work” in the classroom.

Smagorinsky (2009) describes reflective practice as an ongoing process involving reflection, reconsideration, and continued education on pedagogies, students’ needs, and institutional values. He explains this process as

Taking this approach involves, I think, a teacher's continual involvement in some sort of professional growth through reading and discussion, and so keeps a teacher in touch with what’s possible as students, fields, communities, and other factors change over time. It further involves teachers in paying attention to how their students experience their classrooms (Smagorinski, 2009. p. 21).

Reflective practice, according to Smagorinski (2009) and other education scholars (Applebee, 1986; Fulkerson, 2002; Grossman, 1990; Hillocks, 1995; Schon, 1983) is a key component for instructors’ professional growth. Such reflection can take place individually, as instructors keep journals, blogs, or other records of their shifting teaching beliefs and practices. Reflective practice can also take place collectively
when instructors meet within learning communities, in professional development workshops, within education courses, on discussion boards, and at local and national teaching conferences to share teaching ideas, discuss teaching issues, and collaborate on ways to improve current practices.

Most research detailing reflective practice, however, considers how practicing and pre-service instructors at the K-12 educational level participate in these practices. Such research describes how reflective practice plays a key role in developing the pedagogical content knowledge of instructors, who are pursuing life-long careers as educators. Conversely, there is little research providing an in-depth analysis of how postsecondary instructors develop professionally or participate in reflective practice.

In the rest of this chapter, I will discuss how, and in what ways, instructors participating in this PLC evidenced professional growth through reflective practice. Specifically, I will demonstrate how instructors developed pedagogical content knowledge through group accountability and critical self-reflection.

**Professional Learning Community: Evidence of Pedagogical Content Knowledge Growth**

Unlike the *Culture of Collaboration* discussed in chapter two, themes of professional growth did not overtly appear in instructors’ group interactions. Instead, instructors wrote about their professional growth in their post-PLC reflections and teaching portfolios.

To determine how, and in what ways, instructors perceived the PLC experience affecting their pedagogical content knowledge, I was examined how their
teaching beliefs, practices, and expertise were affected. I chose these categories based on Grossman’s (1990) description of pedagogical content knowledge. In Figure 4.2, I have listed the specific post-PLC reflective questions I asked instructors. This figure shows how these questions correspond to Grossman’s (1990) four components of pedagogical content knowledge.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Post-PLC Reflection Questions</th>
<th>Grossman’s Four Components of Pedagogical Content Knowledge</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Please describe how participating in the PLC has or has not affected your teaching philosophy as a composition instructor (You may want to refer back to your initial teaching philosophy you submitted to me).</td>
<td>“The first component includes knowledges and beliefs about the purposes for teaching a subject at different grade levels” (Grossman, 1990, p. 8).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Please describe how participating in the PLC has or has not affected your expertise in the teaching of composition.</td>
<td>“The second component of pedagogical content knowledge includes knowledge of students’ understanding, conceptions, and misconceptions of particular topics in a subject matter... “The third component...includes knowledge of curriculum materials available for teaching particular subject matter” (Grossman, 1990, p. 8).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Please describe how participating in the PLC has or has not affected your classroom practices as a composition instructor.</td>
<td>“A final component of pedagogical content knowledge includes knowledge of instructional strategies and representations for teaching particular topics. Experienced teachers may possess rich repertoires of metaphors, experiments, activities or explanations which are particularly effective for teaching a particular topic, while beginning teachers are still in the process of developing a repertoire of instructional strategies and representations” (Grossman, 1990, p. 9).</td>
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Figure 4.3 Grossman’s Four Components of Pedagogical Content Knowledge
Two sub-themes emerged in instructors’ reflective answers related to the theme of professional growth: accountability and critical self-reflection. I have chosen to discuss the data pertaining to these two sub-themes concurrently based on their interrelatedness. All four instructors indicated that accountability to other PLC group members was a catalyst for professional growth through individual self-reflection and critical analysis of teaching beliefs and practices. In the following section, I will describe each instructor’s answers to the post-PLC reflection questions, analyze their answers according to Grossman’s four components of pedagogical content knowledge, and provide evidence of professional growth through instructors’ teaching portfolios.

Accountability and expanding instructional strategies: Macey.

In response to the question, “Please describe how participating in the PLC has or has not affected your expertise in the teaching of composition,” Macey stated,

*I think the issue of accountability forces an instructor to question their own expertise. When others in the PLC talk about the different topics they bring up in their classrooms, I always ask myself, “Do I teach that?” “Should I be teaching that?” “How could I teach that?” In this way, I think I have gained expertise.*

For Macey, meeting with the other instructors and listening to their teaching ideas and methods presented an opportunity for self-questioning and self-analysis of her own pedagogical beliefs and practices. Macey’s line of self-questioning in this response offers evidence of her professional growth process. She first asks, “Do I teach that?”
This question indicates that Macey is interested in her peers’ pedagogical practices; she also realizes that though all PLC members are teaching the same subject matter, they each possess different teaching strategies.

Her next question - “Should I be teaching that?” - indicates that Macey’s interest in her peers’ pedagogies goes beyond simply listening to them share lesson plans or teaching strategies. By asking, “Should I,” Macey questions her own teaching beliefs. She does not blindly accept her peers’ practices and ideas; instead, she begins wondering whether her peers’ pedagogical beliefs are compatible with her own. Interestingly, in another excerpt from her reflective answers, Macey admits having difficulty deciding if she wants to emulate her peers’ teaching philosophies. Macey explains,

*I still remain very laid-back in the classroom. It seems that the others in our PLC have a more authoritative philosophy when it comes to their relationships with their students. I still can’t manage that kind of sternness that I think others are capable of. This is a good and a bad thing. I don’t think I should betray my personality or instincts as a teacher, but sometimes I do wish I could be more authoritative.*

Exposure to other instructors’ teaching beliefs and practices allows Macey to see one of her weaknesses: In her conversations during PLC meetings and in her individual reflections, Macey admits struggling with classroom management. She believes that her inability to manage students’ behaviors, at times, affects her ability to effectively teach her composition course.
Meeting regularly with other instructors, however, seems to help Macey build her confidence as a classroom leader. The meetings also provide accountability, which inspires her to become a more innovative instructor. Macey writes,

_The meetings also remind me that I should not get too comfortable in my methods and philosophy. Innovation and change are very important to developing pedagogy. Meeting regularly and talking about what other people are doing in the classroom provides a sense of accountability that cannot exist in a vacuum._

As a result of this PLC experience, Macey has changed her teaching practices. Using suggestions offered by other PLC members, Macey has changed her course syllabus to include more explicit rules governing classroom behavior.

Macey’s growth, however, goes beyond simply adapting new ways of managing students. She has also created a new month-long writing project based on two group members’ ideas. Prior to participating in the PLC, Macey taught four first-year composition classes within the span of three semesters. During this time, her assignments, lesson plans, and teaching methods remained primarily the same. While participating in the PLC, however, Macey experienced a teaching “epiphany.” That is, she developed an innovative idea for teaching research-based writing, but she lacked the confidence and the pedagogical strategies to implement this innovation in her classroom. Macey describes her experience as,

_I had an epiphany this semester when one of my students wrote a research paper about long-distance relationships in the style of a Cosmopolitan advice..._
column. I thought, how about asking everyone to turn their research into a “how-to?” Since Beth and Ben both have had success with how-to guides, this experience just proved their points.

After hearing Beth and Ben discuss their methods for teaching the “how-to guide” genre, and after receiving lesson plans, ideas, and suggestions from her peers, Macey develops her own “how-to” writing project.

Macey, then, has developed her pedagogical content knowledge by expanding her repertoire of teaching practices. Macey’s growth is described in Grossman’s (1990) fourth component of pedagogical content knowledge, which is “knowledge of instructional strategies and representations for teaching particular topics. Experienced teachers may possess rich repertoires of metaphors, experiments, activities or explanations which are particularly effective for teaching a particular topic…” (p. 9). That Macey’s teaching practices remained unchanged for three semesters is significant. During this time, she relied upon a limited set of teaching metaphors, activities, and explanations for teaching first-year composition. The lack of innovation within her syllabi during those three semesters indicates either Macey did not generate new teaching strategies, or she did not possess the confidence and resources to implement new ideas.

For Macey, meeting with PLC members to share ideas and solve problems becomes a catalyst for innovation. In Macey’s pre-PLC teaching philosophy, she explains, “My overarching goal is to encourage students to take an active role in their education, to approach their academic work with fervor, and to take pride in their
products.” This goal indicates Macey is interested in making students’ learning interests and students’ writing projects central to her pedagogical practices and course design. After receiving pedagogical support from her peers, Macey is able to realize this goal. She creates a new project based on her student’s learning interests and writing projects (creating a “how-to” genre instead of a “traditional” research-based essay). Macey’s teaching innovation indicates she no longer utilizes the apprenticeship of observation model for developing her pedagogical content knowledge; instead, she looks to her peers and to her own ideas for developing pedagogical resources.

Macey’s experience within the PLC embodies a professionalization process described by DuFour (2004) as, “…a systematic process in which teachers work together to analyze and improve their classroom practice. Teachers work in teams, engaging in an ongoing cycle of questions that promote deep team learning” (p.9). Macey’s set of questions, “Do I teach that? Should I be teaching that? How could I teach that?” leads to her critically analyze her own pedagogical beliefs and practices. Next, she turns to her peers as role models for learning new pedagogical practices and ideas. Finally, Macey makes innovative changes to her course design, evidencing her pedagogical content growth, as depicted in Figure. 4.4.
Theoretical growth as a "trained" teacher: Beth.

As evidenced in her pre-PLC teaching philosophy, Beth’s pedagogical content knowledge is primarily derived from her undergraduate coursework and internship experiences in a teacher preparation program. For example, Beth states, “My philosophy has evolved from my internships and my teaching methods classes. Because I have an English education background, I believe in using quizzes, student reflections, and formative/summative assessments in my class.” Beth’s statement indicates her knowledge of teaching strategies and practices (i.e. quizzes, reflections, etc.). This type of knowledge is best described by Grossman’s (1990) fourth component of pedagogical content knowledge:

A final component of pedagogical content knowledge includes knowledge of instructional strategies and representations for teaching particular topics.
Experienced teachers may possess rich repertoires of metaphors, experiments, activities or explanations which are particularly effective for teaching a particular topic, while beginning teachers are still in the process of developing a repertoire of instructional strategies and representations (p. 9).

Considering her educational background, it is not surprising that Beth possesses knowledge of various instructional strategies. After all, one goal of education coursework is to provide preservice instructors with practical teaching methods.

An equally important goal of education coursework is to provide preservice instructors with a theoretical framework for teaching a particular subject matter. This framework is described by Grossman’s (1990) first component of pedagogical content knowledge as “…knowledges and beliefs about the purposes for teaching a subject at different grade levels” (p. 8). It is this component of pedagogical content knowledge in which Beth experiences the greatest amount of professional growth during her participation within this study. Interestingly, Beth credits her PLC experience, rather than her teacher preparation program, for helping her develop her theoretical framework for teaching writing.

In her pre-PLC teaching philosophy, Beth emphasizes her belief that writing instruction should be interactive, engaging both the instructor and students in choosing course content. She explains, “By giving them a practical, hands-on, choice-oriented class, I allow students to apply their writing to their major, make choices for themselves, and build on skills they can take to other classes in their degree.” When asked if she developed this philosophy within her teacher preparation
program, Beth emphatically replied, "If I had been asked to describe my teaching philosophy last year as an education undergraduate student, I would have answered differently." Beth then described her internship experience, in which she taught 30 ninth grade students. Dealing with classroom and behavioral management for that many students made her feel "exhausted and not wanting to teach." As a result, she primarily focused on daily lesson plans and activities rather than considering the "big picture" of teaching. Beth admitted to not having the time or energy to develop a teaching philosophy while she completed her internships. She also did not see the relevancy of developing such a philosophy. "When all you do is keep the kids busy all day," Beth explained, "there isn’t much incentive to come up with big plans or ideas about teaching."

Although Beth graduated from a teacher education program and completed two teaching internships, she did not draw upon these experiences to develop the theoretical component of her pedagogical content knowledge. Yet, possessing such a theoretical framework, according to education scholars, is crucial for new instructors to effectively interpret theories and methods they encounter in teaching texts and experiences. For example, Gebhardt (1977) describes an instructor’s theoretical framework as a sorting mechanism. He explains,

Writing instructors face a confusing abundance of theories and approaches…Writing teachers need to be able to make some sense out of the obvious differences in emphasis – if not outright contradictions – between such approaches…Part of the preparation of writing teachers, then, is some
theoretical framework against which writing teachers can test new materials and ideas in order to find effective and compatible approaches for their classes (Gebhardt, 1977, pgs. 135-136).

A theoretical framework, then, plays an important role in helping instructors critically analyze new teaching theories and ideas. This framework also allows instructors a method for synthesizing new ideas with pre-existing ideas for use within the classroom.

Similarly, a theoretical framework can assist novice instructors in interpreting their classroom experiences. Grossman (1989) contends, "...teacher education can provide a framework that shapes what beginning teachers subsequently learn in the classroom" (p.29). That is, instructors might utilize a theoretical framework to "make sense" of their interactions with students. Many new instructors consider on-the-job learning as valuable means for gaining new teaching theories and practices (Grossman, 1990; Howey & Grossman, 1989; Lanier & Little, 1986; Lortie, 1975). However, these teaching experiences may not actually promote professional growth if instructors are unable to critically analyze and theorize their experiences. Grossman and Howey (1989) warn, "Without these frameworks, learning from experience can be haphazard, idiosyncratic, and even misleading" (p. 29). For Beth, learning from her undergraduate internships proved to be an idiosyncratic experience. Not yet possessing a theoretical framework, Beth described her internship teaching as "random" and "activity-driven." Beth utilized hands-on, choice-driven teaching
methods, but she did not connect these methods to an overarching learning goal or theoretical philosophy.

Contrasted to her undergraduate teaching experiences, Beth now structures her first-year writing course on specific, theoretical goals. Beth’s course goals include students learning general writing skills (such as research methods and grammatical structures), students learning to analyze and create major-specific genres, and students reflecting on their own writing processes. To achieve these goals, Beth still utilizes hands-on, choice-driven teaching methods; however, these methods are no longer “random,” but intentional. For example, Beth structures her focus project on these two learning outcomes:

1. Students should be able to identify the features of an unfamiliar genre.

2. Students should be able to create content in an unfamiliar genre.

To determine how, and in what ways, students achieve these learning outcomes, Beth creates in-class summative assessments. These assessments include worksheets, surveys, and reflective writings based on each day’s class activities. In these assessments, students are asked to describe how that day’s activity helped them understand how to identify and/or create content in an unfamiliar genre. By using these assessments, Beth explicitly connects her in-class activities to specific student learning outcomes; these assessments help both Beth and her students see whether these hands-on teaching methods are leading to the desired goal. Unlike her undergraduate internship experiences, Beth now views in-class activities as more than
a "random" string of unrelated events. Instead, Beth’s activity-driven, hands-on approach to teaching has theoretical relevance.

In her post-PLC reflection, Beth cites “accountability to members” as the most beneficial aspect to the PLC experience. She describes “accountability” as actively listening to her peers’ teaching ideas, theories, and practices and defending her own choices as an instructor. During PLC group meetings, Beth admits, “I learned to self-reflect and notice aspects of my teaching and preparation I had not given much thought to earlier.” Beth’s response indicates that meeting with her peers resulted in her individual critical self-reflection. The ongoing, regular, and communal nature of these PLC meetings allowed Beth to engage in reflective practice, described by Smargorinski (2009) as, “a teacher’s continual involvement in some sort of professional growth through reading and discussion” (p. 21). Reflecting upon and analyzing her pedagogical practices prompted Beth to begin developing a theoretical framework for teaching. She explains,

Yes, teaching needs to be hands-on and student-driven. In fact, the PLC has given me ideas of how I might connect my philosophy of teaching to my work in the classroom...I have become more intentional with my practices.

Therefore, as a result of this PLC experience, Beth has experienced pedagogical content area growth by learning to connect her practices to pedagogical theory. A depiction of how her new teaching philosophy completes Beth’s sources of pedagogical content knowledge is shown in Figure 4.5.
Reflection and better understanding students' learning needs: Ben.

The accountability provided to instructors in the regular, ongoing PLC meetings is also a catalyst for Ben’s pedagogical content area growth. Prior to the PLC experience, Ben relies heavily on his disciplinary knowledge for constructing his beliefs and practices on the teaching of composition. Ben’s strong reliance on disciplinary knowledge is evident in his pre-PLC teaching philosophy, in which he states,

I guess I see my role, my philosophy, is to tap into their [students’] curiosity, whatever is going to get them stimulated... My class is designed around getting [students] to put thought into the formula and break the formula for
their unique thinking, whatever seems necessary. It allows them to become more individual as opposed to fitting into a formula.

Not surprisingly, Ben, a creative writing student, values writing and writers that are "unique" and "individual." When asked how he developed this philosophy, he admits that being a writer has influenced his teaching beliefs. He explains, "From a creative writing aspect, I get excited about the 'thought' aspect of this class as opposed to grammatical details...I get excited about playing around with different genres, being creative."

Ben's strong reliance on his creative writing background significantly impacts his pedagogical content knowledge. In particular, his reliance on disciplinary knowledge is problematic because he is teaching outside of his discipline; that is, Ben is teaching first-year composition to general education students, not an upper-level creative writing course to English majors. According to rhetoric/composition and education scholars, relying too heavily on disciplinary knowledge can prevent novice instructors from developing pedagogical content knowledge. In particular, Ben's creative writing knowledge affects his understanding of students' learning needs, described by Grossman (1990) as the second component of pedagogical content knowledge, which "...includes knowledge of students' understanding, conceptions, and misconceptions of particular topics in a subject matter..." (p. 8). According to Grossman, an instructor must clearly understand students' learning needs and learning problems related to specific topics in order to effectively create instructional materials to meet those needs and resolve those problems. Because Ben relies on his
disciplinary knowledge of creative writing rather than first-year composition, he may have a skewed or inaccurate understanding of his students' pedagogical needs.

For example, in Ben's teaching philosophy, he clearly views students as "unique individuals." His view may reflect his own experiences as a creative writing student taking workshop classes, in which each student is given individual attention by the "master" writer/instructor. Smit (2004) describes this one-on-one pedagogical structure as an expert-novice relationship, in which "The expert is the person the novice wants to be; novices model themselves after the expert" (p. 175). In such a relationship, the expert tailors instruction to the individual student; further, as a "master" writer, the instructor represents someone for students to emulate. While this one-on-one pedagogical structure may be well suited for the creative writing classroom, it is not an ideal fit for the typical first-year composition course for two reasons. First, the size of the class is a factor. Smit (2004) explains,

In these institutions, writing is usually taught to groups of twenty to twenty-five novice writers with a wide variety of background and experience in writing, so that providing either practice and tips to individual writers is difficult. It would seem that writing teachers need to know some techniques for instructing not individuals but groups of writers (p. 175).

Thus, that the first-year composition course is larger than the typical creative writing workshop and composed of novice writers from multiple academic disciplines makes group instruction more feasible than one-on-one instruction.
A more important factor influencing the instructor-student dynamic in composition classes, however, is the lack of the expert-novice relationship, particularly when the instructor is a graduate teaching assistant (GTA). Smit (2004) asserts,

But in most first-year writing programs, it is difficult for the instructors to have a one-on-one relationship with so many students, and the students do not necessarily look upon the instructors as a model. In fact, students may consider writing instructors, especially if they are graduate teaching assistants or part-time instructors, as the opposite of a model: they may consider writing instructor people in training to be experts, people who have not yet acquired the credentials necessary for giving appropriate advice (p. 175).

The student-instructor dynamic described by Smit may, in part, stem from the fact that many GTAs who are hired to teach first-year composition are not content-area experts. These GTAs, specializing in literature, linguistics, or creative writing, are hired to teach composition, a field in which they do not intend on becoming experts.

GTAs that do not possess disciplinary knowledge within the field of composition studies may have difficulty developing pedagogical content knowledge. Studies conducted by education scholars such as Grossman (1990); Grossman and Richert (1988); Marshall, Smith, and Schaffsma (1997); and Shulman and Shulman (2004) indicate that disciplinary knowledge alone does not provide instructors with the pedagogical knowledge necessary to teach a diverse range of students. Rather, these scholars argue that subject-specific training is needed for instructors to
understand theoretical rationale for teaching a particular subject, gain pedagogical strategies for teaching that subject, and connect students’ learning needs to available curricular resources.

For Ben, a disciplinary background in creative writing affects his beliefs about teaching composition (students are unique individuals) and his course structure (the one-on-one workshop). Though his teaching belief and course structure are not ideally suited to the first-year composition classroom, Ben uses these to teach for three semesters prior to participating in this PLC study. During these three semesters, Ben does not alter his course design; his students create four writing projects, which include a personal narrative, a literary analysis, an argumentative essay/presentation, and a research-based how-to guide (or recipe) on an unfamiliar genre. Ben admits that he developed the first three writing projects based on teaching resources handed down to him by the program’s WPA and other composition GTAs. His last project, The Genre Analysis Research Paper, is one he developed himself. Ben’s project is described in Figure 4.6.

Ben’s genre analysis project reveals how his disciplinary background shapes his beliefs and practices for teaching first-year composition. His project, requiring students to creatively report their research findings in the recipe genre and provide a “unique” presentation to the class, evidences Ben’s desire to treat students as individual writers. In Ben’s teaching portfolio, he describes his approach to teaching this project as “a bit unusual in comparison to my other projects, in that I don’t spend a whole lot of time covering it before setting my students out on their own to
research.” Ben explains that students either “are off studying independently” for this project or working with him one-on-one to draft and revise their recipes. Again, this teaching approach emphasizes Ben’s disciplinary background and his reliance on creative writing workshop pedagogy for structuring his composition class.

**Major Project #3: The Genre Analysis Research Project**

For this project each student will choose a unique and well-focused literary genre that HAS NOT been covered or explored in class. The student will then research and analyze the underlying structural, historical roots, trajectories, and key features. Students will then present their findings to the class. A copy of your research paper and presentation should be turned in with your grade.

Therefore, this project can be broken down into the following components:

1. **Genre Recipe Paper** - Create a 2-3 page single-spaced recipe that takes into account all the elements of the genre (history, trajectory, key features) and attempts to logically explain how to create (or “cook”) this genre. Include at least:
   - Introduction (title, genre, brief history, etc.)
   - History (why this genre is unique)
   - Trajectory (how it has developed over time)
   - Key features (what defines the genre)
   - Final instructions (how to create or “cook” this genre)

   This paper should be accompanied by some kind of visual.

Figure 4.6 Ben’s Genre Analysis Research Project Description

While participating in the PLC, Ben chooses his genre analysis project as his focus project. Interestingly, as a result of his interactions with other PLC members, Ben decides to change his project design and methods for assessing student learning. In previous semesters, Ben required students to create a “genre recipe paper” and a visual presentation, as documented in Figure 4.6. During the fourth PLC group
meeting, Ben explains his project design to the other instructors, indicating that past students “really seemed to like” this project. However, Ben admits to the PLC group members, “In terms of assessing them afterwards, that’s where I’m running into a problem.” In the past, Ben graded students’ recipe papers based on content (including history, trajectories, and key elements of the chosen genre), organization, and conventions (conveying information in the form of a recipe). Ben did not assess whether the recipes students designed accurately depicted how a writer might actually “create” the chosen genre. During his participation in this PLC, Ben decided to make the assessment of student learning within his focus project his own focus for professional development.

Ben’s interest in better understanding his students’ understanding of the recipe genre is first evidenced within the fourth PLC group meeting. In this meeting, Ben tells group members he has a “new idea” that he would like to try with his students. He explains, “I’ve been thinking about this idea since we last met, the idea of having [students] choose one of the recipes and actually follow it.” Immediately, Chris expands on Ben’s idea, saying, “And then the students would have to do it according to the presenter’s directions. And then the presenter could assess that person’s attempt at creating the genre.” Next, Macey jumps into the conversation; she offers Ben positive moral support by saying, “Oh! That would be a great experiment!” Macey also gives Ben some practical pedagogical advice for his idea; she adds, “And then you could have students do a statement about the directions for the recipe they tried creating. Students could do a little further research to see if that other student
left out any directions or information that was important.” Chris agrees with Macey’s plan. Chris says, “This could be an entire writing project. Could you make it into a project, not just a homework assignment?” Ben admits, “Yeah, actually my next project is open right now, and I was wondering if I could make this idea into a project.”

After this conversation with his PLC group members, Ben decides to change his course design to accommodate his new teaching idea. In his teaching portfolio, Ben explains how his project design and methods for assessing student learning changed:

*In the beginning of this study, I didn’t really have a method of assessing students’ knowledge…For the final assessment, I decided to do something completely different just for the PLC. I had my fourth project be an evaluation of sorts for their understanding of the recipe genre in the third project. Here is a brief summary of what I decided to do: For project #4, students were placed in the roles of both an editor and a writer. I placed all the recipes on our class website and told them to select a recipe from those presented by their fellow students. Next, they were asked to check the recipes for accuracy, conducting outside research and making their own electronic or handwritten corrections/notes on what they would alter…After editing the recipe, they were told to follow the instructions and attempt to successfully recreate a piece of work within their selected genre. In sum, on the final day*
of class, they turned in their “editor’s notes” copy of the recipe and their original creation based upon the recipe.

Within Ben’s teaching portfolio and post-PLC reflection, he asserts that his students seemed to learn a great deal from the recipe genre project and follow-up recipe editing project. In fact, by combining these two projects, Ben is able to assess his students’ learning in five of the eight first-year writing program learning outcomes: identifying genres, creating content in a genre, using appropriate digital/print technologies to produce a genre, identifying the trajectory of a genre, and using flexible research skills.

In the past, Ben solely assessed his students’ abilities to research the history of a genre and identify a genre’s key elements within the recipe format by grading students’ final written product. This assessment made it difficult for Ben to determine if his students had completed all the necessary research and had successfully created content in the required genre. In short, Ben did not have a detailed understanding of his students’ conceptions, misconceptions, and processes of researching, describing, and creating content in a required genre. Ben’s difficulty in assessing student learning can be attributed, in part, to his pedagogical content knowledge (or lack of knowledge). Specifically, Ben lacked what Grossman (1990) describes as the second component of pedagogical content knowledge, “...the knowledge of students’ understanding, conceptions, and misconceptions of particular topics in a subject matter…” (p.9). This knowledge of student understanding within the field of English studies may include beliefs about students’ prior knowledge of
literature, writing, and language as well as knowledge of common difficulties students face as readers and writers (Grossman, 1990, p. 105).

Knowledge and beliefs about student understanding affects how instructors structure their courses, choose curricula, determine appropriate pedagogical strategies, and assess student learning. This second component of pedagogical content knowledge, then, can dramatically affect an instructor's pedagogical beliefs and practices. Scholars (Grossman, 1990; Grossman & Richert, 1998; Smagorinski, 2009; Wilson, Shulman, & Richert, 1987) indicate that most teachers develop their knowledge of students' understanding of English from classroom experiences. As learning to read and/or write is a situated experience, it makes sense that many teachers discover students' conceptions and misconceptions of English through the act of teaching reading and writing to actual students. Because English instruction is situated, the pedagogical content knowledge derived from these teaching experiences is also situated. Therefore, English education scholars (Grossman, 1990; Hillocks, 2009; Schon, 1983; Shulman & Shulman, 2004; Smagorinski, 2009) agree that developing this component of pedagogical content knowledge is an ongoing process, requiring instructors to regularly engage in reflective practice.

Smagorinski (1990) recommends instructors adopt an approach to professional reflection and growth called "principled practice," a term introduced by Arthur Applebee (1986). Smagorinski describes (1990) "principled practice" occurring when instructors focus on their situated teaching contexts. He explains,
Teaching through principled practice challenges teachers to think about what is appropriate given the unique intersection that their classroom provides for their many and varied students; their beliefs about teaching and learning; the materials available for them to use; and the public, professional, and policy contexts in which they teach. The notion of principled practice focuses on the why of teaching: why teaching methods work in particular ways in particular settings (2009, p. 20).

In this passage, Smagorinski emphasizes the “why” of teaching; he encourages instructors to view every classroom experience as a “unique intersection,” in which specific pedagogical practices must be adapted to meet specific student learning needs.

In order for principled practice to be effective, Smagorinski argues, instructors must also engage in reflection. He states, “Through reflective practice a teacher continually considers the effect of instruction on student’ learning...” (Smagorinsky, 2009, p. 21). That is, there is no single “perfect” pedagogical belief or practice. Teachers must be engaged in regular, ongoing reflection; they must consider how their understanding of student learning changes with each new group of students. Finally, teachers must be willing to adapt, change, and discard those beliefs and practices to better serve their students’ learning needs.

Ben’s experience during the PLC study represents one instructor’s professional growth through the use of reflective practice. Having already taught this course for three semesters, Ben had a general understanding of his students’
conceptions and misconceptions concerning the content of his first-year composition course. However, his classroom experiences also made him realize that his understanding of his students' knowledge was not complete. He admitted to PLC group members his frustrations assessing student learning; Ben was ready to adapt, change, and discard pedagogical practices to better serve his students’ learning needs. In his post-PLC reflection, Ben attributes the PLC group meetings as the impetus for his growth as an instructor. Ben writes,

*Just like as a creative writer — getting feedback on a piece of my writing helps me realize how hard it is to see the forest when you’re in the thick of the trees. Getting feedback from the PLC was the same. The PLC helped me to discover potential flaws in my ideas, but it also gave me encouragement to try my new ideas in the classroom.*

As Ben’s reflection indicates, the PLC group provided him with the teaching ideas and moral support he needed to create an innovative project assessing student learning.

As a result of this PLC experience, Ben develops his pedagogical content knowledge by better understanding students’ conceptions, misconceptions, and processes for researching, identifying, and creating content in a required genre. Ben’s new fourth project assesses students learning; it is also a “creative” means for Ben to use the one-on-one teaching philosophy derived from his creative writing background. This project, then, allows Ben to continue valuing his students as unique, individual writers. The process of creating this new project also shows Ben
how reflective practice and communal support can lead to teaching innovation. A depiction of Ben’s professional growth within the PLC is shown in Figure 4.7.

**Figure 4.7 Ben’s Pedagogical Content Knowledge**

**Accountability and confidence in pedagogical beliefs: Chris.**

Similar to her peers, Chris believes that the accountability provided in the PLC meetings allowed her to gain confidence as an instructor. When asked how participating in the PLC has or has not affected her expertise in the teaching of composition, Chris replies,

*I think the biggest asset, for me, to come from the PLC is a sense of confidence in the classroom. By seeing what others are bringing to their teaching and struggling with as an instructor, I can have a right-sized perspective of myself as a teacher (i.e. there are things I am talented at, but there are many areas for*
improvement as well). Also, I feel more firmly rooted in my choices about my teaching.

In this response, Chris identifies how peer accountability has affected her teaching confidence in two distinct ways. Accountability provides Chris with the willingness to change her teaching practices as well as the moral support needed to make these pedagogical changes.

First, Chris admits finding value in “seeing what others are bringing to their teaching.” That is, Chris realizes that there is not a single “correct” pedagogical belief. Each instructor in the PLC brings his/her individual beliefs on what it means to teach writing. Similarly, each instructor brings pedagogical issues, or as Chris describes, “[those things we are] struggling with as an instructor.” In her post-PLC response, Chris not only acknowledges that each instructor’s practices, beliefs, and teaching contexts are unique. Chris also equates hearing her peers share their teaching ideas and issues with her own self-reflection and analysis as an educator. By hearing of other instructors’ successes and failures, Chris is able to compare her own beliefs and practices to those of her peers’. As a result, she discovers that she is “talented” at teaching certain topics, and she admits there is “room for improvement” in her pedagogical knowledge as well.

For Chris, peer accountability helps her realize she is not a perfect instructor; she acknowledges a need for further professional growth. While her desire to grow as a professional might seem an obvious reaction, Chris’ willingness to change her pedagogical practices and beliefs is, actually, quite significant. Education scholars
concur that two factors necessary for effective professional growth are instructors’
willingness to change and peers’ willingness to support such change. An instructor’s
willingness or motivation for professional growth, as described by Shulman and
Shulman (2004), can profoundly impact whether workshops, coursework, and
mentoring relationships affect his/her teaching beliefs and practices. They explain,

A teacher can develop a new vision of teaching based on encountering role
models, reading cases, viewing tapes, holding discussions with peers,
reading theoretical accounts, etc., and be quite displeased with the status
quo. Nevertheless, he or she can be unwilling to change in that direction,
insufficiently motivated to change, inadequately supported by his or her
context or peers to take the risks of forgoing extant practices, or exert the
efforts needed to change, and the like (Shulman & Shulman, 2004, p. 261).

Obviously, if an instructor does not embrace the motivation and willingness to
change, the professional development offered will most likely not be accepted.

Closely connected to the instructor’s motivation, according to Shulman and
Shulman (2004), is the support (or lack thereof) provided to the instructor by his/her
peers. They explain, “The learning proceeds most effectively if it is accompanied by
metacognitive awareness and analysis of one’s own learning processes, and is
supported by membership in a learning community” (Shulman & Shulman, 2004, p.
267). That is, once an instructor analyzes his/her pedagogical beliefs and realizes a
need for change, that instructor is more likely to actually follow through with

143
pedagogical change if he/she gains encouragement, help, and constructive criticism from fellow instructors.

Peer accountability and support, then, are vital for providing instructors with the teaching strategies, practical resources, and moral support needed to move beyond a willingness to change into actual change. In fact, all members of this PLC study admitted to feeling increased motivation to make pedagogical changes and increased confidence enacting these changes because they felt well supported by their peers. For example, Beth stated, “I have emerged stronger and more confident because I have obtained a supportive and encouraging teaching network.” Similarly, Ben commented, “The PLC strengthened my confidence...hearing others’ ideas helped generate energy...and gave me a lot of new ideas to try.” Finally, Macey stated, “The PLC meetings also reminded me that I should not get too comfortable in my methods and philosophy. Innovation and change are very important to developing pedagogical beliefs and practices.”

Chris, too, evidenced increased confidence in her philosophy for teaching composition as a result of team meetings. In the last sentence of her post-PLC response, Chris states, “I feel more firmly rooted in my choices about my teaching.” She goes on to explain, “Having to talk about my teaching beliefs and ideas with other was beneficial...I don’t think my identity as a teacher has changed, but now I better understand what I believe about teaching writing and why I teach it in certain ways.” Here, Chris’ increased confidence in her pedagogical content knowledge is evident. Specifically, she is able to articulate Grossman’s (1990) first component of
pedagogical content knowledge, which "… includes knowledges and beliefs about the purposes for teaching a subject" (p. 9).

Possessing a willingness to change and receiving the support needed to change, then, lays the groundwork for Chris to innovate her classroom beliefs and practices. As indicated in Chris' teaching philosophy, she possesses a vision for student learning, in which the writing process is a "self-exploration" process. She explains,

*By sharing in the writing process, and by identifying personal strengths and weaknesses, students can see how their strengths serve their community and how they can find solutions to the hurdles of their writing through their peers.*

*I want to focus on student strengths…*

Here, Chris envisions a student-centered pedagogy, similar to the pedagogy she experienced while teaching in a Montessori school. However, she also admits that her current teaching practices do not always match her pedagogical vision. Therefore, Chris sees a need to change some of her teaching practices, and she has the motivation to make necessary changes.

In the post-PLC reflection, Chris was asked to respond to this statement: "Please describe how participating in the PLC has or has not affected your classroom practices as a composition instructor." Chris answers, "I definitely feel that I adopted many best practices from the PLC members into my classroom. For instance, because of hearing other instructor's experiences, I ran my individual [student] conferences differently this semester (they were longer, included individual
instruction, etc.).” In fact, Chris’ extended-conferences play a key role in her pedagogical content area growth. Through discussions with peers and critical self-reflection, Chris discovers a means for restructuring student conferences; this innovation also helps Chris better align her pedagogical practices with her pedagogical beliefs.

During the fourth PLC group meeting, the topic of one-on-one student conferences emerges. In this discussion, Macey supports the use of conferences, even though this practice can be time-consuming. Beth and Ben describe student conferences as an opportunity to talk with their students about constructive comments they had previously made on the students’ drafts. That is, conferences provide a venue for a verbal discussion with students about the writing before them. Chris, however, connects the practice of student conferencing with the process of student assessment. She describes this process as: formative assessment – whole-class instruction – individual conferencing/instruction – summative assessment.

First, Chris creates a quantitative pre-project questionnaire (Appendix H), in which students rate their confidence in creating certain kinds of writing. Chris asks her students to rate themselves (on a scale from 1-10) in the following areas:

*Creating a specially formatted document on a computer*

*Integrating graphics into a document*

*Conducting formal research on the history of a genre*

*Conducting formal genre analysis*

*Creating a piece of original writing in the style of a chosen genre*
Following these questions, Chris asks this open-ended question:

> What one element of writing, genre critical thinking, etc. would you most like to have specific classroom instruction about?

The purpose of these questions, Chris explains to her peers during our PLC meeting, is to learn what topics should be taught in class, and what topics might be taught to individual students. Based on her students’ responses, Chris designs lessons covering the most frequently-cited topics; she then presents these lessons to the entire class.

Next, Chris uses the students’ responses to choose a specific topic to teach each individual student. Individual instruction is provided during one-on-one conferences, which Chris extends.

Once students complete this project, Chris uses the same quantitative questions and the following qualitative question to assess her students learning. The qualitative question (see Appendix H) is “What one element of writing, genre, critical thinking, etc. did you show the most improvement in through project three?” In Chris’ teaching portfolio, she includes an analysis of student learning based on the pre- and post-project surveys completed by her students. From this analysis, Chris is able to gather tangible evidence on her students’ confidence levels in document formatting skills, graphics integration skills, research skills, genre analysis skills, and original writing skills. Further, these surveys indicate her students felt their skills had improved in all areas.

Chris’ use of student assessment affects her pedagogical content knowledge growth in three distinct ways. First, by using the pre-project survey, Chris is able to
better understand her students' learning needs, described by Grossman (1990) as the second component of pedagogical content knowledge. Grossman (1990) states, "The second component of pedagogical content knowledge includes knowledge of students’ understanding, conceptions, and misconceptions of particular topics in a subject matter…" (p. 8). Clearly, Chris' mixed method approach allows her to evaluate her students' level of confidence in five distinct writing skills; further, her open-ended question allows each student to express individual learning needs.

This assessment does not simply allow Chris to have a deeper understanding of her students' knowledge, conceptions, and misconceptions of the five required writing skills. Chris is then able to use her knowledge of student learning to differentiate her instruction. Through whole-class lessons and extended one-on-one conferences, she changes her pedagogical practices to serve her students' learning needs. In this respect, Chris also experiences growth in the fourth component of pedagogical content knowledge, described as "knowledge of instructional strategies and representations for teaching particular topics" (Grossman, 1990, p.9)

Finally, Chris' assessment-conference model allows her an opportunity to connect her teaching practices to her theoretical beliefs. Before participating in the PLC, Chris desired to have a student-centered class, much like the Montessori model, yet she did not yet having a way to make this desire tangible. Through discussions with other PLC members, Chris learns a better approach to doing student conferences, by making them longer. She also discovers a method for connecting student assessment to individualized instruction within her conferences. In short, Chris went
from thinking about student-centered pedagogy to creating and implementing student-centered pedagogy. Her pedagogical content area growth, then, includes a motivation to change, a student-centered vision, and innovation of teaching practices based on students' learning needs and peer instructors' support. Chris' pedagogical content knowledge is depicted in Figure 4.8. In this figure, it is worth noting that an extra box is drawn to show how student assessment played a part in her professional growth.

![Figure 4.8 Chris' Pedagogical Content Knowledge](image)

As evidenced in the individual case studies of Macey, Beth, Ben, and Chris, the accountability and support through the regular, ongoing PLC meetings prompted instructors to engage individually in critical reflection of their teaching beliefs and practices. As a result of such reflective practice, all three instructors experienced substantial pedagogical content area growth. First, Macey gained pedagogical and
behavioral strategies from her peers. She also attributed her peers' moral support to her decision to make innovative changes in her teaching practices and class policies, thus evidencing her growth in expanding her repertoire of pedagogical strategies.

Next, Beth found the accountability her peers provided as an impetus to develop her theory or philosophy for teaching English. Although Beth already possessed a great deal of teaching experiences and knowledge of teaching strategies, she had not connected these practices to a theoretical framework until discussing with her peers "why" and what she believes about teaching composition.

Next, Ben's need to better assess his students' learning prompted him to rely on his PLC peers for pedagogical advice and moral support. As a result of his peers' encouragement and sharing of ideas, he developed an innovative writing project to assess student learning. Finally, Chris attributed the accountability provided through group meetings as a source of increased confidence and an impetus for teaching innovation. As a result, she listened to her peers' ideas concerning student conferences to develop a method for combining student assessment with differentiated instruction.

In Chapter Five, I will give a detailed analysis of the third PLC principle, *Ensuring Students Learn*. This chapter defines this principle and cites the differing ways student learning is addressed in traditional PLCs and this first-year composition PLC.
CHAPTER V

ENSURING STUDENTS LEARN: STUDENT ASSESSMENT AND PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Defining the Ensuring Students Learn Principle

The traditional professional learning community model, as defined by DuFour (2004), is comprised of three core principles: a Culture of Collaboration, a Focus on Results, and Ensuring Students Learn. In this study, I have used these three principles as a theoretical framework for analyzing the data collected in instructors’ reflective writings, teaching portfolios, and interactions during PLC group meetings. As described in Chapter Three, three themes emerged from instructors’ meetings evidencing their participation in A Culture of Collaboration. These themes included idea-sharing, problem-solving, and offering one another moral support. In Chapter Four, I analyzed the Focus on Results principle by describing specific ways in which instructors experienced pedagogical content knowledge growth. All instructors attributed their growth to the accountability and collaboration provided in group meetings and the individual self-reflection that took place within their teaching portfolios.

In this chapter, I will analyze the third PLC core principle, Ensuring Students Learn. Within a traditional PLC model, Ensuring Students Learn is listed as the first principle. It provides the focus for PLC members’ beliefs about educating students, members’ goals for assessing student achievement, and members’ values for working collaboratively. That is, within a traditional PLC, this third core principle is what
members use to design school mission and vision statement as well as core values shared among teachers. The biggest difference between the traditional PLC and the PLC used in this study relates to this third core principle. Within the traditional model, the Ensuring Students Learn principle plays a key role in defining the PLC’s mission, vision, and values. In this study, however, this principle does not play a key role in determining the first-year composition PLC’s focus or its members instructional practices.

**Ensuring Students Learn within a Traditional PLC: An Overview**

Within a traditional PLC, the third core principle basically means that instructors and administrators who participate within this model adopt “learning for all” beliefs and practices. DuFour (2004) describes the Ensuring Students Learn principle as a “core mission” which greatly impacts an entire learning environment. He explains,

> The professional learning community model flows from the assumption that the core mission of formal education is not simply to ensure that students are taught, but to ensure that they learn. This simple shift – from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning – has profound implications for schools (p. 8).

In order to adopt the Ensuring Students Learn principle, DuFour recommends PLC members engage in ongoing exploration of the following three questions.

1. What do we want each student to learn?
2. How will we know when each student has learned it?
3. How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning?

(DuFour, 2004, p. 8).

Within a traditional PLC, instructors and administrators typically take the following steps to engage in these student-achievement focused questions.

First, PLC members create school-wide mission/vision statements and student learning goals. Mission statements express a school’s fundamental purpose; vision statements provide a future target (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). These statements, then, encompass an entire school and/or district and provide a general idea of what school personnel currently and futuristically hope to accomplish. If the mission/vision statements describe the “big picture” of student achievement, learning goals specify clear, specific, attainable, and time-bound steps for making short-term gains toward the big picture vision. These goals are typically developed by individual PLC teams based on content-areas or grade-levels. These goals are also typically tied to district, state, or national standards; common assessments; or standardized tests. For example, a PLC group might set a learning goal of ensuring that 80% of all 10th graders receive a score of 7 or higher on a district-wide writing exam. The goal listed in this example is defined by education scholars as a “common assessment,” or an assessment that is “…created collaboratively by teams of teachers who teach the same course or grade level” (Siggins & DuFour, 2009, p. 640). By tying specific learning goals to a common assessment, teachers also determine a specific method for answering DuFour’s (2004) Ensuring Students Learn question, “How will we know when each student has learned it?” (p. 8).
In a traditional PLC, then, teachers engage in an ongoing process of setting learning goals and using common assessments to monitor whether students have learned set goals. A third step in this process is determining responses for students who experience difficulty learning set goals. DuFour (2004) recommends PLC members respond to these students immediately (help now rather than at the end of a semester); respond based on intervention (help students within the course rather than relying on summer school or remediation); and respond directly (require rather than invite students to receive extra help). In conclusion, the steps members of a traditional PLC take to meet the Ensuring Students Learn principle are depicted in figure 5.1.

Figure 5.1 Ensuring Students Learn: Process Steps in an Ongoing Cycle
Ensuring Students Learn within the First-Year Composition PLC: An Overview

Within the PLC used in this study, members followed the traditional process steps in order to define the Ensuring Students Learn principle. That is, instructors in the first-year composition PLC discussed school mission and vision statements, determined a specific student learning goal, assessed students' understanding of this goal, and created future student learning goals based on assessment results. However, the first-year composition instructors in this study chose not to follow these Ensuring Students Learn steps precisely the same way K-12 teachers in a traditional PLC do. Differences in the typical K-12 setting and in this particular postsecondary educational setting influenced the ways in which these first-year composition instructors approached the Ensuring Students Learn principle. Specifically, the absence of standardized student assessments and curriculum aligned to common assessments (both of which are common in the K-12 setting) greatly affected how these postsecondary instructors measured student achievement. As a result, the absence of standardized assessments affected the role student achievement played in this first-year composition PLC. Ultimately, differences between the typical K-12 setting and this study's postsecondary educational setting led to profound modifications of the traditional PLC's focus on student achievement.

In this chapter, I will provide a narrative detailing this PLC group's process for developing the Ensuring Students Learn principle. This chapter will describe how this principle was modified to accommodate this local postsecondary educational
setting. In particular, this chapter will describe the three key questions used in a traditional PLC to assess student learning; Figure 5.2 depicts these three questions, how this principle is applied in a traditional PLC, and how this principle was altered to meet the unique needs of this postsecondary first-year composition educational setting.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ensuring Students Learn: Three Key Questions</th>
<th>In a Traditional PLC</th>
<th>In the First-Year Composition PLC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. What do we want each student to learn?   | Mission and vision statements created at the district or school level.  
Entire school or individual PLC groups create student learning goals. PLC teams devise common assessments (based on core standards and/or standardized tests) to determine if students have learned target goals. PLC members work collectively to support students who need help. | First-year composition program has eight student learning outcomes. PLC members choose one learning outcome as its focus for the semester. Each PLC member devises his/her own assessments to determine if students have learned the focus outcome. PLC members decide individually how to support students within their respective classes. |
| 2. How will we know when each student has learned it? |  |  |
| 3. How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning? |  |  |

Figure 5.2 Ensuring Students Learn Principle: Three Key Questions

As evidenced in Figure 5.2, the typical K-12 PLC model typically ties student achievement directly to national-level and state-level content-area standards and to standardized tests. These common assessments are used to collect data evidencing student learning. Within this first-year composition PLC, instructors are not required to use common assessments or standardized tests. Therefore, monitoring student learning becomes the responsibility of individual instructors. These differences in measuring student learning greatly affect how the PLC model, in both settings, is structured. By analyzing the three key questions DuFour (2004) recommends PLC
members use for establishing the *Ensuring Students Learn* principle, it is clear modifications of the traditional model must be made to accommodate the postsecondary setting in which this study is situated.

**Ensuring Students Learn: Three Key Questions**

Key question #1: What do we want each student to learn?

Within a traditional PLC, instructors and administrators create mission and vision statements. These statements indicate to students, parents, faculty, staff, and local community members the focus for the educational institution. At some K-12 schools, mission and vision statements are created collaboratively among various staff members; further, students may also be involved in identifying a school’s mission or vision. At other schools, administrators may “hand down” or “declare” these statements without seeking the input of faculty, staff, and students. Generally speaking, many K-12 mission/vision statements are fairly similar and fairly broad in scope. DuFour and Eaker (1998) assert that most of these statements include the belief that “all students can learn” and that the goal of K-12 education is to create “life-long learners” and “productive citizens” (p. 58).

Such mission and vision statements can provide guiding framework for faculty, staff, and students by identifying what that community of educators believes and hopes to achieve. However, these statements are oftentimes so general they do not provide a specific goal or a specific plan for achieving that goal. As a result, instructors may not feel their class objectives, daily lessons, or teaching beliefs are truly connected to the school’s mission and vision.
For example, within the PLC used in this study, instructors were asked to identify the mission and vision statements for their institution. During our first group meeting, I gave the instructors the document, “Four Building Blocks for Building a Professional Learning Community” (see Appendix B). This document included the following questions, based on DuFour’s (2004) traditional PLC model.

1. *What is our school’s “mission?”*

2. *What is our school’s “vision?” What is the vision for our first-year writing program?*

3. *What attitudes, behaviors, and commitments must we have to achieve our vision?*

4. *What is a realistic, attainable student learning goal for our group?*

After I gave this document to the instructors, I asked them to consider these questions and come prepared to discuss answers to these questions in our next PLC meeting.

At our second PLC group meeting, we returned to these four questions. All four instructors admitted that they had never investigated the school’s mission or vision statements before now. They searched the university’s website to find these statements, which they felt were quite vague. Like many other education institutions, this university’s mission and vision entailed supported teaching, research, and public service. In general, the instructors did not feel personally connected to these statements. Part of the instructors’ disconnect might arise from this educational setting. Unlike many K-12 educational settings, instructors teaching first-year composition are not “housed” within a single school or district. That is, at the K-12
level, there is often one mission statement for an entire district. If this is a large
district, each elementary and secondary school may create an individual statement as
well. In both cases, however, teachers are fairly closely connected to their schools’ or
districts’ mission and vision statements. Conversely, the instructors in this study do
not belong to a single school or district. Instead, these instructors work within the
First-Year Writing Program, the Department of English, the College of Arts and
Sciences, and the university. Further, each of these educational bodies may possess
its own mission/vision statements. Therefore, the “tiered” structure of this large
postsecondary institution may be one factor contributing to these first-year
composition instructors’ disconnect to university mission and vision statements.

Next, K-12 and postsecondary educational settings also differ in the values
they possess. DuFour and Eaker (1998) stress the importance in schools creating a
belief about student learning (a mission statement) and a future goal for student
learning (a mission statement). In order to practically achieve student learning beliefs
and goals, DuFour and Eaker (1998) suggest schools also identify shared values.
They explain,

Most importantly, shared values provide the direction that enables individuals
to act autonomously. If the members of a school know what they are trying to
create and are using the values as guiding principles for their actions and
decisions, there is little need for the ubiquitous rule book that is meant to
cover all possible situations in a school setting (p. 98).
In order for members of a traditional PLC to establish shared values, DuFour recommends members consider the following question: What attitudes, behaviors, and commitments must we have to achieve our vision?

Within the first-year composition PLC, instructors discussed this question during our second group meeting. Interestingly, this conversation was very brief. They felt this question was "not very relevant" to postsecondary-level instructors in their particular program. Chris explained that though first-year composition instructors mostly work autonomously, they should respect one another; in short, "attitudes and behaviors" should not be a "stumbling block" for instructors. Macey and Beth admitted that they sometimes "do not get along" with other first-year composition instructors on a personal level. However, petty disagreements or personality conflicts were not a major issue; if they experienced any negative relationships with other instructors, these did not affect their classroom instruction.

All instructors agreed that our PLC did not need to create a formal "value statement." These instructors had voluntarily joined this PLC. Though they were not close friends, they agreed to participate in the PLC because they all wanted to become better instructors. They did not foresee any "attitude" or "behavior" issues, which might affect the PLC's success.

Terms such as "values," "attitude," and "behavior" may not appeal to educators. DuFour and Eaker (1998) explain,

The term "values" is certainly an emotion-laden word in the current political climate... Yet it should be evident that in context of school improvement,
clarifying shared values is an apolitical process. It does not represent an attempt to project one’s views upon another. Rather the process calls for groups to identify the commitments that will help them achieve mutual goals (p. 99).

At the K-12 educational setting, establishing shared values may hold more significance simply due to the close proximity in which many teachers work. For example, many elementary- and secondary-level teachers work in the same building as their colleagues. These teachers share a common teaching schedule, common meeting places (i.e. hallways, lounges, copy rooms), common curricula, and common students. Relationships among these teachers, then, can highly impact their common work setting. As a result, proponents of the PLC strongly urge instructors and administrators to create supportive “relational communities.” Hord (2008), an educational scholar, emphasizes the importance of developing “positive attitudes” and “respect” among PLC members (p. 12). She asserts, “Trust is a significant factor for the community, and leaders should take steps to build this important capital” (Hord, 2008, p. 12).

Within the K-12 setting, then, trust and shared values seem crucial for maintaining positive, productive relationships among faculty who work closely (both physically and relationally). Among instructors in the first-year composition PLC, however, shared values became less important. These instructors, who teach at different times, in different locations, and with different groups of students, do not share close personal relationships. As a result, they did not feel the need to create
formal, specific value statements. The participants’ decision not to create such statements, then, represents the first modification made to the *Ensuring Students Learn* principle. This modification reflects the perspective and beliefs of this particular group of participants and is based on their local setting; this modification cannot represent the perspectives of all GTAs in all first-year composition settings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ensuring Students Learn: A Contrast in Settings</th>
<th>In Many K-12 Settings</th>
<th>In this First-Year Composition Setting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Number of mission and vision statements**   | • Mission and vision statements created at the district-level  
• In some districts, individual schools create mission and vision statements | • First-year composition program does not have mission/vision statements, program has eight student learning outcomes  
• Department of English lists mission/vision statements for student learning in its undergraduate/graduate programs  
• University publishes mission and vision statements for entire school |
| **Need for value statements**                 | • Teachers work within close proximity to one another  
• Teachers share a common teaching schedule, common physical spaces, and (oftentimes) common students  
• Scholars emphasize the need for shared value statements to ensure productive relationships among PLC members | • Instructors do not work within regular close proximity to one another  
• Instructors do not share a common teaching schedule  
• Instructors do not share students  
• Instructors, in general, do not collaborate or share close, working relationships with one another  
• Instructors in this PLC did not see the need to establish shared values |

*Figure 5.3 A Contrast in K-12 and Postsecondary Educational Settings: Mission, Vision, Values*
Yet, this PLC model’s modifications may shed light into the PLC model’s flexibility in various educational settings. Figure 5.3 represents how the typical K-12 setting differs from this study’s postsecondary context, thus impacting how the PLC members might view and use mission, vision, and value statements.

At the K-12 level, then, mission, vision, and value statements are critical for unifying faculty, staff, administrators and students. However, the general, vague nature of these statements may also make it difficult for instructors to incorporate these statements daily into their classrooms. One way to remedy this situation is by working in small groups (PLCs) rather than working as a large, amorphous body (i.e. an academic department, a school, or a school district). DuFour and Eaker (1998) suggest that individual PLCs personalize district/school mission and vision statements by answering this first key question: What do we want each student to learn?

Within the first-year composition PLC, we addressed this key question during our second meeting by determining a specific student learning goal. Members of this PLC decided to focus on a single learning goal from our first-year writing program’s student learning outcomes. Specifically, PLC members focused on the goal: “Students will evidence their ability to create content in a specific genre…” Further, instructors agreed to focus on this goal within their third writing project. Though each instructor had designed a different project, he/she made this common learning outcome the focus of student assessment and learning. Therefore, for the rest of the semester, members of the first-year composition PLC agreed to meet regularly, share teaching resources, assess student learning of our focus goal, and
collect evidence of student learning. Figure 5.4 depicts the plan PLC members devised for answering the first key question.

**Key question #2: How will we know when each student has learned it?**

To answer the second question — How will we know when each student has learned it? — members of this PLC decided not to follow the traditional model and use a common assessment. As discussed in Chapter Four, student assessment in the K-12 setting generally refers to common assessments, standardized testing, and adherence to state-level and national-wide content-area standards. Unlike the K-12 educational setting, in which many teachers follow a prescribed curriculum and assign similar (if not identical) writing assignments and exams, instructors within this first-year composition program are granted autonomy to design their own curricula,
assignments, and methods for assessment. The lack of standardized assessments and the autonomy provided to these instructors made answering question two a bit complicated. Members believed a common assessment would not be feasible in this educational setting because each instructor was teaching a different writing project. However, the instructors did not initially have a plan for assessing student learning individually. Therefore, we decided to devote two group meetings for discussing ideas on student assessment.

The topic of student assessment was first addressed during our third PLC meeting. In this meeting, I asked instructors the following related questions:

1. How do we currently “assess” students enrolled in our first-year composition courses?
2. What are some assessments we might use in our focus project this semester?

In response to the first question, Beth and Macey replied that grading students’ final written projects are a means of assessing learning. Ben agreed that assessing students’ completed assignments are an important assessment method; he also talked about assessing students’ “baseline” knowledge by using a survey at the beginning of the semester. In his survey, Ben asked students about their strengths and weaknesses as writers; he described the survey as a way for students to begin talking about their writing histories. Beth commented that Ben seemed to be doing a good job providing his students with formative and summative assessments. Chris also liked Ben’s
assessment methods; Chris admitted that she wanted to do more formative assessments with her students this semester.

At this point in the conversation, Macey jumped in, asking Beth and Chris to explain what they meant by “formative” and “summative” assessments. Macey had heard of these terms before, but she was not sure she knew exactly what they meant. Beth explained that a “formative” assessment measures students’ understanding of a subject before an instructor begins teaching the lesson or project; a “summative” assessment happens when the project is finished. By doing both types of assessment, Beth continued, a teacher can see whether a student has increased his/her knowledge.

This brief exchange between Beth and Macey on the topic of assessment was significant. First, this conversation indicated that not all instructors in this PLC share the same “teaching vocabulary.” Beth and Chris, who used the terms “formative” and “summative” during the PLC group meeting, both possessed teaching backgrounds. Beth had a bachelor’s degree in English education and had taught at the secondary-level. Similarly, Chris had taught for the Montesorri schools. Both Beth and Chris, then, were familiar with these teaching terms; further, their knowledge of assessment was not merely theoretical. As former K-12 teachers, both Beth and Chris had practically implemented formative and summative assessments within their classrooms.

Macey, who did not complete education coursework as an undergraduate or graduate student and who did not possess K-12 teaching experience, was less familiar with assessment terms and practices. Additionally, Macey, like other first-year
composition instructors, was not required to assess her students’ learning beyond their final course grades. That is, students enrolled in first-year composition do not take an exit exam; there is no common assessment, standardized test, or nation-wide standard for measuring student achievement in this course. Unlike the K-12 educational setting, in which curricula and lesson plans are aligned to state and national standards, this first-year composition program does not currently require instructors to report if (and how) their projects and lessons align to the eight student learning outcomes. Instead, instructors are granted autonomy to teach and evaluate student learning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ensuring Students Learn: A Contrast in Settings</th>
<th>In Many K-12 ings</th>
<th>In this First-Year Composition Setting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assessment Vocabulary</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teachers have undergone formal educational training (i.e. undergraduate coursework, teaching internship, workshops and in-service professional development, etc.).</td>
<td>• Teachers’ educational training is varied.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teachers share the same vocabulary related to assessment.</td>
<td>• Teachers’ practical experiences devising and implementing assessment models is varied.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assessment Accountability</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teachers are (usually) required to align curriculum, lesson plans, and assessments to state and/or national standards.</td>
<td>• Teachers may not share the same vocabulary related to assessment.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teachers are (often) required to use content-area or district-wide common assessments.</td>
<td>• Teachers are required to use the same textbook.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Standardized tests are aligned to same state and/or national standards.</td>
<td>• Program has eight student learning outcomes.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Teachers are not required to “prove” their lessons are aligned to outcomes.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Teachers are not required to use common assessments.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• There are no standardized tests for students.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5.5 A Contrast in K-12 and Postsecondary Educational Settings: Assessment
Figure 5.5 shows key differences between this particular postsecondary setting and typical K-12 educational settings, which may influence PLC members’ assessment practices.

Considering the autonomy given to the participants of this study and the current lack of assessment accountability, it should come as no surprise that instructors in this PLC answered our first group discussion question on assessment (How do we currently “assess” students enrolled in our first-year composition courses?) in very different ways. Ben assessed student learning using a formative survey and final project grades. Beth used rubrics to grade students’ class participation and final writing assignments. Chris determined student achievement based on rubrics and reflections. Macey graded students’ essays holistically and used one-on-one conferences to do individual student evaluations.

Next, I asked instructors to respond to our second question regarding student assessment: What are some assessments we might in our focus project this semester? Initially, instructors did not cite any specific strategies. Instead, Macey and Beth suggested that students should, somehow, take part in their own assessment. Chris agreed, explaining that the first-year composition students are technically adults; these students should be capable of meta-cognitive thinking and self-evaluation. At the conclusion of this meeting, the PLC members agreed to meet again in three weeks; the purpose of the fourth meeting was to discuss specific assessment strategies each instructor had designed for his/her focus project. During the fourth meeting, instructors shared the assessment methods they had devised. In instructors’ teaching
portfolios, each member also offered a brief rationale as to how his/her assessment method was suited to the type of project taught. Figure 5.6 depicts each instructor’s focus project, assessment method(s), and assessment rationale.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructor</th>
<th>Focus Project Description</th>
<th>Assessment Method(s)</th>
<th>Rationale for Assessment Method(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>Unfamiliar Genre: • Students research and produce a genre of writing with which they are unfamiliar. • Students write an I-Search Essay on their research process and a how-to guide for creating the unfamiliar genre.</td>
<td>Within instruction: Various in-class activities analyzing students’ skills at giving directions. Summative: • Rubric for evaluating final I-Search Essays. • Rubric for evaluating final how-to guides</td>
<td>In-class assessments to determine pacing and content of daily lessons. Rubrics provide a means for assessing student learning in various categories (i.e. organization, grammar, purpose, etc.).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>Genre Analysis: • Students choose a literary genre to research, analyze, and produce. • Students produce a recipe explaining how to create the genre. • Students present recipe orally to class.</td>
<td>Summative: • Instructor uses rubric to grade final recipes and presentations. • Students assess the effectiveness of recipes. • Students edit a peer’s recipe and create a genre based on peer’s recipe.</td>
<td>In order to discover if a recipe is done well, it must be tested. Students “test” each other’s recipes by following the steps; students assess each other.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>Unfamiliar Genre: • Students research and produce an unfamiliar genre. • Students produce a how-to manual on creating this genre. • Students produce an example of</td>
<td>Formative: Pre-Project Questionnaire asks students to rate their confidence in five categories of research and writing. Within Instruction: Students write reflective statements on one element of</td>
<td>Questionnaires provide instructor with feedback as to what students believe they are “good” at doing and what they need “help” learning. Questionnaires</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As indicated in Figure 5.6, instructors in this first-year composition PLC possess a large degree of autonomy when designing student projects and assessment methods. Despite their autonomy and the lack of accountability for aligning lesson plans and student assessments to programmatic student learning outcomes, instructors do evidence awareness of different assessment methods; instructors are also able to rationalize the use of such methods. For example, Beth is interested in assessing her students' confidence in the same five categories of research and writing as the Pre-Project Questionnaire. They also show the importance of individual conferences as a "vital tool" for assessments. Conferences are a critical, focused conversation about one's writing. Conferences are a way to help each student focus the theme of his/her essay. Conferences are a way to do grammar mini-lessons with each student.
students' ability to create clear "how-to" directions. In addition to assessing her students' summatively through the use of rubrics, she also tracks her students' learning progress by assigning them various in-class activities on the topic of writing directions. Beth's students, then, are evaluated several times on this same writing skill. In this case, student achievement is not based solely on a final product, but on students' ability to improve over time.

Similar to Beth, Macey also devises assessment methods that track students' learning progress. Macey uses a three-stage assessment approach. First, she determines students' baseline knowledge of the genre they will create by asking them to complete a short questionnaire. Based on students' conceptions and misconceptions of this genre, Macey adjusts her lesson plans and instruction to meet students' general learning needs. She also provides students with differentiated instruction by conducting one-on-one conferences, in which she offers "extensive margin comments." Macey explains these comments and gives students individualized instruction on grammar, mechanics, and various higher order concerns. Finally, Macey uses a rubric to conduct summative evaluations of her students' final written products. In her three-stage approach, Macey views conferences as "a vital tool for assessment." In her teaching portfolio, she explains, "During conferences, I can usually dissect each student's tendencies extensively. I find that these one-on-one conversations are great for helping students to grasp the quirks and common mistakes in their own writing." The goal of conferences, then, seems to be two-fold. Macey uses conferences to assess students' writing skills, including grammar usage,
formatting dialogue, and crafting effective introductions. She also wants students to "grasp" their own mistakes, or learn to self-assess. For Macey, then, assessing student achievement goes beyond assigning a final grade; she encourages students to become involved in their own assessment process.

Self-assessment is also evident in Chris’ project design. Similar to Macey, Chris acquires’ students baseline knowledge by asking them to complete a pre-project questionnaire. Unlike Macey’s questionnaire, which is reflective, Chris requires students to assign numeric values reflecting their confidence in five research and writing tasks. Once this project is completed, Chris then asks students to complete a post-project questionnaire, which includes the same numeric scale and same research and writing tasks. These questionnaires provide Chris and her students with valuable assessment information. First, by asking students to “rate” their confidence in various tasks, Chris engages students in self-assessment. Of course, this type of self-assessment is not infallible; the number ratings are only as reliable as the students’ honesty in rating themselves. According to these surveys, Chris’ students indicated their confidence in the following areas increased.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Document Formatting Skills:</th>
<th>+1.87 points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Graphics Integration Skills:</td>
<td>+1.86 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Skills:</td>
<td>+1.41 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genre Analysis Skills:</td>
<td>+2.54 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Original Writing Skills:</td>
<td>+1.4 points</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
These questionnaires, then, provide students an opportunity to self-assess and Chris a means for better understanding her students' confidence levels.

Additionally, these questionnaires help Chris design her lessons. At the end of the Pre-Project Questionnaire, students are asked to answer the question, “What one element of writing, genre, critical thinking, etc. would you most like to have specific classroom instruction about?” Chris uses students’ answers to design classroom lessons, homework assignments, and required readings. Assessment of student learning, then, is an ongoing process for Chris. She requires students participate in their own assessment, and she uses these self-assessments to determine best practices for teaching.

Like the other members of this PLC, Ben also values students' participation in the assessment process. However, he does not require his students to complete self-assessments. Instead, Ben utilizes peer assessment. For his focus project, Ben requires students to conduct research on a literary genre, culminating in a “recipe” which explains how to “cook” or create that genre. Because the recipe genre requires readers to follow precise steps, its effectiveness is usually “tested” when a reader performs those steps. Therefore, Ben decides a good way to assess these recipe projects is for students to actually follow them. That is, he requires students to “test-out” a peer’s recipe by creating the genre described using the step-by-step instructions provided. By requiring students to “test out” each others’ recipes, Ben is no longer the “grading authority.” Though Ben does use a rubric to evaluate each student’s recipe, he also allows students to receive feedback from their peers. From this
experience, students learn whether their recipes “really work or not.” For Ben, assessment goes beyond grading students’ grammatical skills or ability to clearly convey a message; his peer assessment model helps students view their writing as having “real purposes beyond just being an assignment.”

The instructors in this PLC, then, individually create and perform student learning assessments. These individualized assessments occur, to some degree, due to the educational setting in which they work, which allows instructors autonomy in lesson design and does not require them to use common assessments. Of course, other first-year composition programs may not perfectly match this study’s context. For example, other programs may use a common curriculum, shared writing projects, and standardized assessments. This study, then, can only show how the lack of standardized assessments and teacher accountability affected these participants’ beliefs and practices for monitoring students’ learning.

**Key question #3: How will we respond when a student faces difficulty in learning?**

Within the *Ensuring Students Learn* principle, members of a traditional PLC focus intently on student achievement by first determining school mission/vision statements and specific student learning goals. Next, PLC members devise methods for assessing whether students are meeting those goals. When students do not meet these goals, PLC members consider this third key question: How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning?
In many K-12 educational settings, instructors have daily contact with their students for an entire semester, an entire year, or for multiple years. Further, K-12 instructors have close contact with the other instructors teaching their students. In this educational setting, where instructors share students and work in close proximity of one another, it is feasible to collectively offer students extra instructional support. DuFour (2004) describes this process as PLC members collaborating and “...designing strategies to ensure that struggling students receive additional time and support, no matter who their teacher is” (p.8). PLC members may provide struggling students with additional time and support through after-school programs; one-on-one meetings between students and teachers; peer tutoring; and the assistance of paraprofessionals, guidance counselors and/or academic coaches. Within many postsecondary educational settings, however, instructors generally do not share common students, common teaching times, or common assignments. Working collectively to offer students added support, then, does not seem as practical as it is at the K-12 level.

Instead of working collectively, members of the first-year composition PLC decided to address the issue of student achievement individually. In addition to creating assessments to monitor how, and in what ways, students acquired the focus learning outcome, instructors also agreed to find ways to support underachieving students, as needed.

Chris, Macey, and Beth viewed their individual conferences as a means for providing students with additional time and support. During this focus project, Chris
extended her conference time with students. By meeting with each student for a longer period of time, she was able to give students grammar mini-lessons or other instruction, as needed. Similarly, Macey chose one or two specific lessons to teach each student during her conferences. As a result, each student received individualized attention on specific material. Finally, Beth viewed conferences as a way to monitor her students’ progress. During these sessions, she read students’ drafts and also collected feedback on concepts and ideas students wanted to learn about further. Then, Beth used this feedback to plan specific lessons tailored to students’ learning needs.

Ben provided students with additional time and support by meeting with them in small groups. In his teaching portfolio, Ben explained that the presentation portion of this project is when most students seem to experience difficulty. Therefore, he adopted the following method for helping students.

This project requires me to deal with a lot of concerns on an individual basis.

I have learned that the best tactic is – after the students are let loose on their own to research and prepare – to let students contact me with their concerns, but then to have a meeting with a group of presenters a week or so before their presentation/project is due. This allows me to tack multiple questions all at once at a critical time for the student in the process.

Ben used group conferences, then, to provide students with added support. However, he also required students to contact him with specific concerns. So, if students need additional help, they must be somewhat proactive.
Members within the first-year composition PLC, then, offered struggling students additional time and support through individual conferences and group meetings. Instructors felt it was necessary to make this Ensuring Students Learn principle an individual, rather than a collective, task due to certain factors in their particular post-secondary educational setting. Unlike many K-12 settings, there are no staff members (such as paraprofessionals or tutors) to provide instructors with additional support within the classroom. Outside the classroom, many K-12 instructors also have greater support systems than their post-secondary counterparts. For example, K-12 instructors typically communicate regularly with students’ parents through newsletters, parent letters, email messages, and parent-teacher conferences. Further, K-12 instructors may also work within close proximity to their students’ other content-area teachers. By collaborating with support staff, parents, and other teachers, K-12 instructors can design various measures of support for struggling students.

Conversely, these first-year composition instructors do not typically have an extensive support system outside their classrooms. First, these post-secondary instructors usually do not have contact with their students’ other instructors. Similarly, instructors are not legally allowed to contact their students’ parents due to Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). Finally, instructors in this first-year composition program do not teach their students for an extended period of time; they usually work with students for a single, 15-week semester. Therefore, these post-secondary instructors tend to have a short-term relationship with their
students, and this relationship is focused on learning in a single course. Within this educational context, then, meeting the needs of struggling students becomes the responsibility of each individual instructor. Figure 5.7 compares the K-12 and post-secondary settings, describing differences in teacher-student relationships and teacher support networks.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ensuring Students Learn: A Contrast in Settings</th>
<th>In Many K-12 Settings</th>
<th>In this First-Year Composition Setting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher-Student Relationship</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teachers spend a significant amount of</td>
<td>• Teachers spend</td>
<td>• Teachers spend significantly less</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>instructional time with students (i.e.</td>
<td>significantly less</td>
<td>instructional time with students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>classes meet daily or at least 2-3 times</td>
<td>instruction time</td>
<td>(i.e. class meets 1-4 hours per</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>each week)</td>
<td>with students)</td>
<td>week)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teachers may teach the same student for an</td>
<td>• Teachers rarely</td>
<td>• Teachers rarely teach the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>extended period of time (one semester or</td>
<td>teach the</td>
<td>same student longer than</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>one year)</td>
<td>same student</td>
<td>one semester)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teachers may teach the same student over</td>
<td>• Teachers do not</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>the course of one or more years (i.e. 9th</td>
<td>have additional</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grade English, 10th grade English, 11th</td>
<td>classroom</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grade journalism)</td>
<td>support)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teacher may have additional classroom</td>
<td>• Teachers rarely</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>support (i.e. intern teacher, paraprofessional,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>guidance counselor, administrator, curriculum</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>supervisor, etc)</td>
<td>contact with</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teachers work within close</td>
<td>• Teachers do not</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>proximity to students’ other teachers</td>
<td>have any contact</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legally, teachers are allowed to divulge</td>
<td>with students’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>student assessment results with other</td>
<td>parents)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>teachers</td>
<td>Legally,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teachers have regular contact with</td>
<td>• Teachers do not</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>students’ parents Legally, teachers are</td>
<td>have any contact</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>allowed to divulge student assessment</td>
<td>with students’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>results</td>
<td>parents)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Schools usually provide on-</td>
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</table>
In conclusion, the *Ensuring Students Learn* principle for supporting struggling students did not play a significant role in conversations held by members of this first-year composition PLC or in instructors' assessment materials. To a large degree, its lack of significance in this study may be attributed to this particular post-secondary educational setting, which does not seem conducive for providing students with collaborative, extensive instructional support. In general, the *Ensuring Students Learn* principle, which relies heavily on standardized assessment in the traditional PLC model, is not an effective guiding principle for this particular post-secondary setting. Should standardized assessment of student learning become the focus of this first-year composition program, however, the PLC might serve as one method for developing institutional mission/vision statements, creating learning goals, and measuring student achievement.

In Chapter Six, I will offer implications this study holds for future research in the fields of English education and rhetoric and composition. This chapter will include possible methods for exploring further modifications of the PLC within K-12 teacher training programs and first-year composition programs. Finally, this chapter
will include implications for further research into teacher pedagogical growth within the interdisciplinary field of writing teacher education.
Writing Teacher Education: A Disciplinary Gap

Within English studies, one area in which the fields of English education and rhetoric and composition intersect is Writing Teacher Education. This field is devoted to providing K-12 teachers and first-year composition instructors with professional training and ongoing support in the teaching of writing. Scholars and practitioners within both fields, then, are invested in similar (if not identical) work. That is, English education faculty members teach methods courses to pre-service (and often practicing) teachers, conduct research on writing pedagogy, and supervise teaching internships. Similarly, writing program administrators (WPAs) teach methods courses to first-year composition instructors, supervise these instructors, and often conduct research on composition methodology.

Many English education faculty and WPAs, then, share common responsibilities for training and supervising writing teachers. However, the fields of English education and rhetoric and composition, in general, have not yet created a cohesive writing teacher education discipline. Instead, a significant “gap” between these fields remains. Tremmel (2002) best describes this gap as,

English educators and writing program administrators (WPAs) have been engaged in many of the same disciplinary labors for over half a century, and even though they have had significant points of contact with each other in the
past, they currently live separate academic lives, fenced off from each other in largely separate bureaucratic compounds (pg. 1).

As this passage indicates, both academic fields are invested in the same goal: providing teachers with the theoretical knowledge and practical training needed to teach writing effectively in a given context.

At first glance, it may seem that secondary-level teachers and post-secondary instructors possess vastly different training needs. Yet, many composition scholars and English educators argue that writing teachers, across grade levels, share many common needs. Further, scholars such as Broz (2002), Bush (2005), Gebhardt (1977), S. Rose and Finders (1999; 2002), Tremmel (2002), and Wilhoit (2002) believe both secondary-level and post-secondary-level instructors would benefit if stronger connections between the fields of English education and rhetoric and composition were made. For example, Bush (2005) asserts,

Two schools of exclusive scholarship about the teaching of writing currently exist, comprising those within the realm of composition studies and those who are lumped into the category of English education. These two worlds of teaching writing exist with similar goals, common cores of theory, and parallel pedagogies. Yet, with a few notable exceptions, these worlds have minimal interaction…We can and should develop cross-developmental conversations about teaching writing (p.340).

Recently, some composition scholars and English educators have collaborated on creating effective methods for training writing teachers. Specifically, S. Rose and
Finders (1999; 2002) have conducted studies using situated performances and reflective practices for preparing preservice K-12 teachers and first-year composition instructors for their first teaching positions. Cross-disciplinary studies and conversations such as those promoted by S. Rose and Finders (1999; 2002), Bush (2005) and Tremmel and Broz (2002) indicate that sharing theoretical and practical pedagogical knowledge is possible between these two fields. Yet, no continual, considerable strides have been made to create a cohesive writing teacher education discipline.

This study attempts to address this disciplinary gap by drawing upon scholars within the fields of teacher education, English education, and rhetoric and composition. This study investigates the professional development of one group of instructors within the field of writing teacher education: graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) of first-year composition. Scholarship in rhetoric and composition indicates that current models of teacher training for GTAs may not sufficiently provide novice instructors with the ongoing support needed for their professional growth. This study attempts to address this gap in GTA training and the English education/rhetoric and composition gap by considering current professional development models and turning to scholars in both fields. Specifically, this study draws upon the scholarship of WPAs and composition scholars to define GTAs' professionalization needs and current GTA training models. Next, this study turns to the field of K-12 teacher education to analyze the professional learning community model as a means for providing GTAs with ongoing support. Finally, this study builds upon research
conducted in English education by examining how participating instructors’ pedagogical content knowledge was affected by the PLC experience.

While English education scholarship and K-12 teacher education models are not always a perfect fit for the postsecondary setting and for the professional development needs of first-year composition instructors, this study attempts to make connections within these fields. This study, then, is situated in this cross-section of writing teacher education. Within this cross-section, this study provides implications for how we (as Writing Program Administrators and English educators) can support the professional growth of writing teachers, across grade levels and campuses.

More specifically, key findings from this study indicate the adaptability of one professional development model, the PLC, as a means for supporting teachers’ professional growth. In this chapter, I will first summarize this study’s key findings regarding the adaptability of the PLC model and offer recommendations for WPAs and/or English educators for the modified PLC’s use.

**Recommendations for Future PLC Use**

As evidenced in this study, the PLC model is flexible. With modifications, it can effectively be used in a variety of educational settings to provide teachers with a supportive peer community and a venue for experiencing practical and theoretical pedagogical growth. Based on modifications made to the model in this study, I believe the PLC can be used effectively both among K-12 teachers and first-year composition instructors. However, based on the findings from this study, I believe successful implementation of the PLC relies on the following key factors.
Intentional time.

The experiences of the PLC members in this study corroborate other research on collaborative teaching communities; that is, such a community does not simply “happen.” Institutions must be intentional in providing the time, space, and resources for such collaboration to take place. Darling-Hammond et al. (2009) insist, “Research shows that when schools are strategic in creating time and productive working relationships within academic departments…benefits can include…more willingness to share practices and try new ways of teaching, and more success in solving problems of practice” (p. 11). Similarly, DuFour and Eaker (1998) maintain, “To build professional learning communities, meaningful collaboration must be systematically embedded into the daily life of the school” (p. 118).

Part of the PLC’s success in this study resulted from the participants’ willingness to set aside meeting time. Over the course of the semester, PLC members met for six one-hour meetings. These meetings occurred in addition to their already-busy workloads, which included teaching classes, preparing lessons to teach, grading student work, holding office hours, and attending to their own responsibilities as graduate students enrolled in coursework. Despite their busy schedules, the participants in this study created intentional time to meet as a group, share teaching ideas and resources, and serve as a support to their peers. Specifically allocating time for group meetings was vital; further, each meeting had a concrete focus (i.e. discuss assessment strategies, discuss results of assessments, etc.). By agreeing to meet at a specified time for a specified focus, participants engaged in intense, focused
conversations directly related to their real-world teaching situations. In this study, these intentional meetings were productive. That is, participants did not simply gather and complain about students' apathy or the broken copy machine. Instead, these meetings prompted deep, critical discussions regarding participants’ teaching practices and theoretical beliefs.

For a PLC to be successful within a K-12 educational setting or a first-year composition program, then, I recommend the WPA or administrator of this program intentionally create time for PLC meetings. For example, instructors ought to have similar teaching schedules, so that PLC group members can easily gather. Next, an administrator may want to require PLC groups to submit meeting agendas and/or minutes so that each group is held accountable for creating intentional, focused meeting times. Finally, an administrator may consider requiring PLC groups to produce an “end product.” Within this study, each PLC participant created a teaching portfolio as a means of reporting student achievement in his/her individual class. Other “end products” might include PLC groups producing a packet of teaching materials to be distributed to other teachers or a report detailing gains in student achievement, new methods for conducting peer review, or new strategies for using technology in the classroom. The purpose of this “end product” is to help PLC members structure their meetings; that is, if PLC members are committed to pursuing a common goal, their meetings will more likely be intentionally focused on this goal.
**Teachers “buy-in.”**

Closely related to the need for intentionally focused PLC team meetings is the attitude of the PLC team members. That is, the PLC in this study was successful, in part, due to the teachers' willingness to “buy-in” to the model. DuFour and Eaker (1998) insist that successful learning communities happen when teachers buy-in to the model and “recognize their obligation to work together on school issues” (p. 219). This factor was evidenced in this study by the instructors’ embodiment of the *Culture of Collaboration* principle. Throughout the PLC group meetings, instructors continually offered one another positive feedback and moral support. Though these instructors did not teach common students, they took an interest in one another’s classes by sharing teaching ideas and problem-solving advice. Further, the members of this first-year composition PLC volunteered to participate in this study because they viewed themselves as dedicated teachers who were interested in improving their pedagogical practices and beliefs.

Participants in this study, then, admitted to “buying-in” to the PLC model. In their PLC meeting conversations and individual reflections, participants acknowledged their desire to “become better teachers.” Additionally, participants stated that this model might not be successful with some of their peers – other GTAs who did not seem interested in improving their teaching practices. In fact, one participant thought “forcing reluctant teachers” into this model may “sabotage everyone’s positive learning experience.”
Considering the importance of teachers’ attitudes toward professionalization and willingness to grow as teachers, I do not recommend the PLC model be “forced” upon instructors. Ideally, this model would work best if presented as one option of professional development. For those instructors who do not enjoy collaboration or do not wish to invest the necessary time into group meetings, I recommend an alternate, individualized professional development plan be offered.

**Professional development occurs in different stages.**

When analyzing participants’ pedagogical content knowledge growth in this study, I discovered that the four instructors developed in very different ways. Specifically, Macey and Ben used the PLC as a practical resource, or a place to gather new teaching ideas and resources as well as receive moral support when facing classroom problems. Conversely, Beth and Chris did not primarily use PLC group meetings to gather new pedagogical practices. Instead, Beth and Chris used conversations during PLC meetings as launching points for deep, critical reflection on their teaching beliefs. Further, they approached student assessment as a means for connecting their classroom practices with their emerging theoretical beliefs about teaching. In sum, the level to which each instructor experienced pedagogical content knowledge growth in this study was related to his/her ability to engage with the PLC on a scholarly level.

Concerning future use of this PLC model, I recommend administrators create groups in which differing stages of professional development might take place. By this, I mean PLC administrators should intentionally structure groups so that
instructors bring a range of teaching expertise, experiences, and knowledge to their group. In this study, grouping novice and more experienced instructors resulted in both practical and theoretical discussions. Such discussions, then, prompted instructors to develop pedagogical content knowledge in varying ways and to varying degrees. The PLC model allowed the novice instructors to focus on receiving practical pedagogical training. The model also prompted the more experienced instructors to move beyond gathering practical resources to engaging in theoretical reflection. The PLC, as used in this study, proved to be flexible in providing instructors professional development at the level or stage that was needed.

**Common knowledge base.**

Finally, this study revealed another key factor contributing to instructors’ professional development within a PLC. That is, instructors’ ability to participate in team meetings was, in part, related to their common knowledge regarding the teaching of writing. Interestingly, this factor was not successfully implemented in this study. Specifically, the lack of participants’ common knowledge became increasingly evident during our third, fourth, and fifth meetings, in which group members discussed their strategies for assessing student achievement.

Within these discussions, instructors realized that they did not share a common “teacher vocabulary.” For example, two instructors repeatedly used the terms “formative assessment” and “summative assessment” while talking about their teaching practices. A third instructor, however, admitted to not being familiar with those terms or how those terms translate into daily teaching practices. Conversations
such as these indicated that the participants in this study did not share a common knowledge base for teaching writing. These instructors had drastically different educational backgrounds and teaching experiences. Further, they had undergone their initial teacher training (a week-long orientation and semester-long practicum course) in two different years with two different professors.

Unlike most K-12-level teachers, these first-year composition instructors did not graduate from a teacher preparation program, in which they would have learned a common “teacher vocabulary,” obtained content-area knowledge, and received pedagogical training. I am not suggesting that first-year composition GTAs ought to be trained identically as their K-12 counterparts. Instead, I recommend that GTAs be provided a certain degree of common knowledge before being placed into a long-term professional development model, such as the PLC. For example, a WPA might structure orientation workshops and practica on the PLC core principles, so that when instructors “graduate” from the practicum and are placed in a PLC group, they are familiar with this model’s key concepts. Further, WPAs and GTAs might collaborate to create and define a “teacher vocabulary” that articulates the local program’s learning goals. In short, by integrating the PLC principles and a common vocabulary into the “big picture” of GTA training, professional development might become a long-term, ongoing, collaborative process in which all instructors can participate and add to the common knowledge base.

The PLC model, then, is a flexible, adaptable model, which can be modified to meet instructors’ professional development needs in a variety of educational
settings. This study offers one such modification for use within a first-year composition program. Obviously, this study is exploratory; that is, it opens new possibilities for conducting research on teacher professionalization in various settings.

Next, I will offer implications for future research into this model by returning to my original research questions and by drawing upon findings from my study and research from the fields of rhetoric and composition, English education, and teacher education.

**Implications: Pedagogical Content Knowledge Growth**

My first overarching research question in this study was: In what ways does working within the PLC model affect participants’ competence and expertise in the teaching of first-year composition? In order to collect data to answer this question, I asked participating instructors the following questions.

a) How do instructors perceive their expertise and confidence in pedagogical content knowledge prior to experiencing the PLC?

b) To what extent can the PLC develop instructors’ pedagogical content knowledge?

c) How do instructors describe the experience of working in the PLC?

d) How do instructors perceive their confidence and expertise in pedagogical content knowledge after experiencing the PLC?

By collecting instructors’ teaching philosophies, observing their group interactions during PLC meetings, conducting one-on-one interviews, and reading their teaching portfolios, I was able to perform formative and summative evaluations of their pedagogical content knowledge. Overall, this study indicated that all four participants experienced increased confidence and expertise in pedagogical content knowledge. Further, all participants attributed their increased confidence and
expertise to their participation in the PLC. The instructors’ pedagogical content knowledge growth evidenced in this study provides the following key implications for WPAs and English educators.

**Professionalization is a (long) process.**

Teaching, unlike many other professions, is one in which prospective instructors experience a lifetime of “classroom experiences” before ultimately assuming the role of teacher. That is, prospective instructors, both at the K-12 and postsecondary levels, spend at least 17 years as students. During this time, these prospective instructors observe their elementary, secondary, and university teachers’ practices, methods, and personalities. Lortie (1975) calls this process the “apprenticeship of observation.” Through this observation process, prospective teachers gather information on behavioral management, pedagogical practices, and teaching styles, which can highly influence their beliefs on what makes “a good teacher.”

The apprenticeship of observation model has lead to a commonly held misconception regarding the teaching profession. That is, many prospective teachers - as well as parents, community members, and other non-teachers - believe “anyone” can teach. After all, every adult has accumulated years of experience within the classroom; every adult has seen “good” teachers and “bad” teachers. Yet, apprenticeship of observation leads to a second-hand knowledge of teaching rather than first-hand knowledge acquired through a rigorous, in-depth professionalization process. Education scholars, such as Wildman and Niles (1987), explain the
complexity of this professionalization process, and how common misconceptions about teaching undermine this process in the following passage.

One of the major misconceptions about teaching, found both inside and outside the profession, is that teaching is a relatively commonplace, easy-to-learn task... In contrast to the notion that teaching expertise can be quickly acquired by any reasonably intelligent individual, research on human learning implies that professional growth in teaching has an emerging quality, that the process takes substantial time... (Wildman and Niles, 1987, pp. 4-5).

As indicated in this passage, learning to teach is a lengthy process, not a simple task one can learn quickly or a task one learns simply from observing other teachers.

This misconception regarding the professionalization process is not limited to K-12 level teachers. This misconception also applies to postsecondary instructors of first-year composition. Composition scholars such as Alden (1913), Allen (1952), Berlin (1987), Dobrin (2005), Latterell (1996), Pytlik and Liggett (2002, Tremmel and Broz (2002), Wilhoit (2002), and Yancey (2005) have commented extensively on past and current models of GTA preparation. These scholars note how, until recently, most novice first-year composition instructors were hired to teach with very little theoretical or practical pedagogical training. Allen (1952) provides the following metaphor to describe the lack of professionalization many GTAs experience. He asserts, "What is being done to prepare the college teacher of English is just as inadequate and outmoded as the old Model T would be on a modern express highway" (Allen, 1952, p. 3). Obviously, much has changed in GTA preparation
programs since the publication of Allen’s article. As indicated in the literature review this study provides, most postsecondary institutions now provide GTAs with pedagogical training through an introductory orientation and a practicum course. This current model of training GTAs, however, is short-term. This current model of training does not seem to support instructors in continual, long-term pedagogical content knowledge growth.

**Dispel the misconception that “anyone” can teach.**

One implication for future research in the area of pedagogical content knowledge, then, relates to commonly held misconceptions on teachers’ professionalization process. As indicated by the participants in this study, novice instructors need time to develop their pedagogical content knowledge. Yet, most first-year composition programs continue to use a short-term training model; this short-term training model, in part, perpetuates the common misconception that “anyone” can teach.

Within the field of composition and rhetoric, the most commonly cited source providing and overview of current GTA training models is Latterell’s 1996 study. In the past decade or so since that article’s publication, it is possible that some first-year composition programs have developed long-term professionalization models. Yet, there is no detailed record of such models. One possible means for dispelling the “anyone can teach” misconception might be to investigate current GTA training models nationwide, discovering ways that WPAs support long-term professional growth of first-year composition instructors.
Better understand how GTAs initially develop pedagogical content knowledge.

This study raises another implication for future research related to instructors’ pedagogical content knowledge growth. This study utilized Grossman’s (1990) theoretical framework for defining and measuring pedagogical content knowledge, thus extending her research investigating how novice instructors develop such knowledge. Grossman’s (1990) framework, however, was applied to the professional growth of secondary-level English instructors. Most of these instructors had graduated from a teacher preparation program prior to participating in Grossman’s study. Conversely, most of the instructors who participated in the first-year composition PLC did not attend a teacher preparation program as undergraduate students. In fact, Beth was the only instructor in this study who had earned a bachelor’s degree in education.

Considering the differing education backgrounds of the instructors in Grossman’s study and in this PLC study, it is possible that Grossman’s definition for pedagogical content knowledge and her theories on how instructors develop such knowledge may not perfectly align to the first-year composition instructors. Therefore, this study raises implications for future research on the topic of pedagogical content knowledge. In particular, WPAs and English educators might benefit from better understanding how instructors who do not undergo a teacher preparation program develop their pedagogical content knowledge. Such research might enable WPAs to restructure training programs to better serve GTAs’
professional development needs. Such research might also benefit English educators, particularly those teaching non-traditional education students or students enrolled in alternative certification programs.

**Better understand how practicing teachers continue to develop pedagogical content knowledge.**

A third implication for future research raised by this study pertains to instructors' ongoing professionalization process. That is, once instructors have gained a few years of teaching experience, how do they continue to develop their pedagogical content knowledge?

As evidenced in this study, all instructors possessed some degree of pedagogical content knowledge prior to their participation in this PLC. Yet, close analysis of instructors' pre-PLC teaching philosophies and group conversations revealed that their pedagogical content knowledge was not fully developed. In general, these instructors were operating under the apprenticeship of observation model; that is, instructors were simply "teaching the way they were taught" without critically analyzing their pedagogical beliefs and practices.

It is impossible to know whether these instructors would have experienced pedagogical content knowledge growth had they continued to teach without the support and accountability provided to them by the PLC. While this study clearly indicates the PLC promoted professional growth among these participants; this is not to suggest that the PLC is the only model which can bring about such results.
Within the field of rhetoric and composition, many scholars (Barr-Ebest, 2002; Dobrin, 2005; Latterell, 1996; Long et. al, 1996; Pytlik & Liggett, 2002; Wilhoit, 2002; Yancey 2002) have explored peer mentoring as one means for providing GTAs with ongoing support. While these scholars discuss various models for mentoring, and how such relationships affect mentors and mentees, they do not address how (or if) mentoring affects instructors’ pedagogical content knowledge. Similarly, in the K-12 educational setting, much research documents methods for providing teachers with professional development (Darling-Hammond et. al, 2009; DuFour, 2004; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Sarason, 1996; and Sipe & Rosewarne, 2005). Such scholars suggest teachers learn best when provided hands-on, job-embedded professional development. However, these scholars have yet to do in-depth studies examining how such professional development directly impacts participating instructors’ pedagogical content knowledge.

Therefore, one area in which WPAs and English educators might do future research is within the area of ongoing professional development. Such research might explore the complex process of how teachers become better teachers, what professional development models support growth, and whether K-12 and postsecondary level instructors experience this growth through similar or different processes.
Implications: The Modified PLC Model

In addition to examining how postsecondary-level instructors develop pedagogical content knowledge and how these instructors grow professionally, this study analyzes one model, the PLC, as a means for supporting instructor growth. The PLC, however, has historically been developed and used within the K-12 educational setting. Little research documents how this model might be modified to meet the professional development needs of postsecondary-level instructors. Therefore, a second overarching research question I developed for this study involves the PLC model itself. This question asks,

In what ways does the PLC need to be modified from the “traditional” K-12 model to “work” in a postsecondary composition program?

To answer this question, I next developed a set of three sub-questions. In the following section, I have listed each sub-question and have provided findings from my study suggesting further implications for research on the professional learning community as a postsecondary-level development model.

Sub-question: What roles might a WPA play in administering this modified PLC model?

Within the “traditional” PLC, much emphasis is placed on members working collaboratively as equals. DuFour (2004) describes this structure as, “The powerful collaboration that characterizes professional learning communities is a systematic process in which teachers work together to analyze and improve their classroom practices” (p. 9). At the center of the traditional PLC, then, are teachers; more
importantly, these teachers work as equals. The equal status provided to teachers in a PLC team greatly affects how this model functions.

Historically, most K-12 schools have possessed a top-down leadership structure. In this structure, the principal directs his/her staff, including how this staff engages in professional development by choosing topics (i.e. behavioral management, curriculum-focused) and methods (i.e. guest speakers, workshops, conferences) for such development. Within the PLC model, however, the principle is not the sole leader; instead he/she is a "sharing principal." The concept of the "sharing principal" is best described by Hord (2008) as, "The principal is key for the initiation and development of any new element in the school, but the sharing principal soon develops the leadership potential of the staff and becomes the collaborative 'guide on the side' rather than the 'sage on the stage'" (p. 12). A sharing principal, then, guides teachers in the formation of PLC teams; once these teams are established, the principal allows teachers to lead their own teams.

The collaborative structure which defines the traditional PLC model was also used in this study's first-year composition PLC. Within this PLC, I played the role of the "sharing principal" or "sharing WPA" by initiating the teachers in forming the PLC; helping the teachers develop a mission, vision, and student learning outcome for our PLC; and guiding teachers in determining discussion topics for team meetings. During the actual meetings, however, I did not take a leadership role. That is, I did not lead our conversations or require team members to prepare specific teaching questions, problems, or issues for our discussion. Instead, conversations in our PLC
team meetings grew organically; that is, instructors chose which topics they wanted to
discuss or which classroom issues with which they needed help. Further, I did not
take a leadership role in helping instructors solve classroom problems as they arose.
Rather, teachers offered problem-solving advice or teaching ideas to one another
without turning to me for the "right" answers to their classroom issues. By refraining
from leading our conversations or solving teachers' problems, I purposefully made
myself a "guide on the side" or a "sharing WPA" in our PLC.

In their post-PLC reflection statements, instructors agreed that working
collaboratively as equals was a crucial element to our PLC. Ben stated,

What I loved about the PLC we established was that our individuality was not
infringed upon...There is nothing wrong with someone being in charge of the
meetings and asking us how certain ideas pertain to the overall goal of first-
year writing courses, but I would not want there to be a hierarchy of thought
or a centralized power.

For Ben, and the other PLC members, the "guide on the side" role I played seemed to
help them take ownership and leadership of group meetings. In short, the participants
of this study truly felt the PLC provided them with a sense of community. For
example, Macey said,

I think this is an excellent model. If instructors were grouped together from
the get-go, a greater sense of camaraderie would exist in our first-year writing
community. I think some of the initiatives and workshops that the program
provides would be better attended because instructors would be constantly reminded of the importance of professional development.

This PLC structure, then, allowed members to feel supported by a collaborative community, a community in which they (and their leader) were equal partners.

Although this structure worked well in this study, this “sharing role” might be difficult for a WPA to adopt. One reason this role may have been successful in this study is due to my own status as the Assistant Director of the program and as a full-time graduate student. In this situation, I was not the “real” WPA (the program director) and I was not a “real” professor (a tenure-track faculty member). Perhaps my status, then, as a fellow graduate student and quasi-administrator allowed participants to feel comfortable with this PLC structure.

In another context, it may be more difficult and problematic for a WPA to “let go” administering his/her program. In reality, many WPAs’ work entails more than providing ongoing training for GTAs. Most WPAs are also involved in conducting program-wide student assessment, evaluating instructors’ performance, developing curriculum, and ensuring continuity of curriculum and course outcomes. Therefore, it may be difficult for a WPA to adopt a hands-off approach to administering program-wide PLCs. This study, then, offers one area for future research. Such research might include investigating possible roles a WPA may play in administering a PLC. These roles may include:
WPA as Team Leader: Such research might investigate adapting the PLC model when a WPA assumes direct leadership of all PLCs within a first-year writing program. This research might analyze current models for the professionalization of GTAs, including models in which the WPA adopts full leadership responsibilities. This research might contrast such models with the PLC, noting how the WPA manages his/her authority over several separate groups of instructors. This research might be valuable for exploring how authority within the first-year composition is shared and/or contested.

WPA as (Silent) Overseer: Such research might investigate how the PLC might be administered in a hands-off approach by a WPA. This research might examine how first-year composition instructors work collaboratively and/or as teacher-leaders. As various instructor-led PLCs develop over time, these PLCs might develop further modifications. Such modifications could provide insights on alternate methods for structuring first-year composition program leadership. Instructor-led PLCs might also provide WPAs and English educators with further information on how instructors participate in peer-led professional development.

WPA as Sharing Leader: Similar to the PLC model developed for this study, this research might explore how a WPA and instructors share leadership responsibilities in administering a program-wide PLC. This research might expand upon Long et al.’s (1996) call for a collaborative, “collegial” model of GTA professional development. In theory, Long et al. envision a first-year
writing program in which instructors and WPAs are equal share-holders; specifically, GTAs serve as instructors, mentors, and administrators alongside WPAs in a “a responsive and collaborative community of teachers” (1996; p. 74). In reality, however, Long et al. do not cite a specific professional development model for achieving this collaborative community. Therefore, research into a collegial PLC model might provide WPAs and GTAs resources for sharing leadership responsibilities.

**Sub-question: What implications does this case study raise for resources needed to administer this PLC model?**

As suggested in the roles for WPAs listed above, the amount and types of resources needed to administer this PLC model would vary greatly. In this study, the most important resources included instructors’ willingness to participate and instructors’ time. This study, however, lasted only a short amount of time (one semester). Future research might include investigating what material resources are needed to sustain the PLC long-term (over the course of a year or longer).

**Sub-question: What implications does this study raise for future research into this model?**

As already indicated, this study raises implications for future research in the administration of the PLC and in developing resources for the PLC. A third area for possible research, which this study did not fully address, pertains to student achievement. In a traditional PLC model, student achievement plays a key role in determining a school’s mission, vision, and goals; Further, the PLC’s effectiveness is judged by teachers and administrators based on student achievement results (i.e. 203
standardized test scores and common assessments). Within this first-year composition PLC, no standardized assessments were used. Therefore, student achievement was not the primary focus of this study. In the future, WPAs may conduct research on how the PLC model might be used to assess student achievement within a first-year writing program.

Another area for future research might include the flexibility of this model in general. As indicated in this study, the traditional model was not a “perfect fit” for this particular postsecondary-level first-year composition program. However, with modifications, the PLC model did serve two important roles in providing ongoing professional support to participants of this study. First, this modified PLC offered participants assistance in the daily, complex tasks of teaching; that is, by sharing resources, problem-solving, and encouraging one another, the PLC members felt supported in their day-to-day teaching responsibilities. Second, this modified PLC also promoted participants’ pedagogical content knowledge growth. By sharing a common student learning goal, collecting evidence of student achievement, and sharing teaching ideas and beliefs during PLC meetings, participants were held accountable for their pedagogical practices. Further, participants began to critically analyze their theoretical assumptions and beliefs for teaching first-year composition.

In this particular setting, then, the modified PLC model proved to be an effective means for providing instructors with ongoing support. These modifications, however, were highly influenced by these particular instructors’ professionalization needs and by this particular educational setting. Other first-year composition
instructors (both within this setting and at other settings) may have differing professional development needs. Likewise, different first-year composition programs (such as ones located within a liberal arts college or a community college) may not be identical to this study’s setting. Future studies of the PLC model’s flexibility, then, might investigate how various factors (i.e. common student assessments, shared curriculum, number of faculty, experience of faculty, size of program, etc.) contribute to further modifying the PLC, and if the PLC remains an effective professionalization model with such modifications.

Additionally, future studies of the PLC’s flexibility might investigate how this model might be adapted within various K-12 contexts. Up until now, most research on the PLC documents its use among in-service elementary- and secondary-level teachers (All Things PLC). Little, if any, research considers how this model might be used to support interning preservice teachers. As evidenced in this PLC study, the model is flexible enough to promote teacher pedagogical growth with instructors in their first teaching experiences. It would be worth investigating, then, how this model might be used among in-service teachers who supervise interns and among interning teachers at the K-12 level.

Concluding Thoughts on Writing Teacher Education and Professional Learning Communities

This study has attempted to address two gaps which currently exist within the field of writing teacher education. The first gap concerns the lack of shared scholarship and resources on the training and supporting of writing teachers between
the fields of English education and rhetoric and composition. Tremmel (2002), among other scholars (Bush, 2005; Gebhardt, 1997; Wilhoit, 2002), calls for greater community between English educators and WPAs. Tremmel (2002) asserts,

Writing teacher education for secondary teachers should not be a completely separate enterprise from writing teacher education for first-year composition. The writing curriculum should not be severed between the grades 12 and 13. The majority of first-year composition students still have one foot firmly planted in high school, and it makes sense for beginning TAs to learn about the teaching of writing in secondary schools (pp. 13-14).

As Tremmel suggests, one possible means for closing the disciplinary gap between rhetoric and composition and English education is by utilizing scholarship from both fields in discovering effective methods for training and supporting writing teachers at all grade levels.

Like Tremmel, Bush (2005) agrees that writing teaching educators would benefit from further interactions. He states, “Elementary teachers have much to teach college composition scholars about the ways to build a classroom of shared learning. Likewise, college composition specialists can enrich the teaching of elementary, middle, and high school teachers via their active knowledge of theory and other elements of composition studies” (Bush, 2005; p. 340). In short, English educators and composition scholars share many similar teaching responsibilities and research interests. Within the field of writing teacher education, more cross-discipline research and resource-sharing should take place between these two fields. This study
is one example of how the gap dividing English educators and composition scholars might be bridged.

Next, this study addresses a second gap; this is the gap in ongoing professional development many GTAs of first-year composition currently face. By turning to scholarship in English education, WPAs and composition scholars may better understand how beginning teachers develop pedagogical content knowledge. By turning to scholarship in teacher education, WPAs and composition scholars may then learn practical methods and models for providing GTAs with ongoing pedagogical support. This study, which is situated in a cross-section of these fields, represents one attempt to bridge disciplinary gaps and provide GTAs with practical support. In conclusion, this study may help WPAs, K-12 teachers, first-year composition instructors, teacher educators and scholars envision other theoretical and practical ways to build community within the field of writing teacher education.
Appendix A

"What is a Professional Learning Community?"
Handout for PLC Group Members

"To create a professional learning community, focus on learning rather than teaching, work collaboratively, and hold yourself accountable for results" ~ Richard DuFour

Big Idea #1: Ensuring that Students Learn

- What does this idea mean?
  Focus should be on what students are learning rather than what we, as teachers, are teaching.
  Three crucial questions teachers should ask are:
  1. What do we want each student to learn?
  2. How will we know when each student has learned it?
  3. How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning?

- What does this idea mean for our first-year composition PLC?
  As a group, we will choose one project we are teaching in English 1050 during Spring 2010 semester as our focus. As a group, we do not have to teach the same, identical project, but we will collaborate on the following:

  1. What learning outcome do we want each student to learn?
  2. How will we know when each student has learned it? (Choose a means for assessing our students’ understanding of the learning outcome chosen).
  3. How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty learning? (Choose methods and a timeline for offering students additional assistance).

Big Idea #2: A Culture of Collaboration

- What does this idea mean?
  “…the powerful collaboration that characterizes professional learning communities is a systematic process in which teachers work together to analyze and improve their classroom practice” (DuFour 9).

- What does this idea mean for our first-year composition PLC?
  We will agree to meet regularly throughout spring 2010 semester to discuss our shared learning outcome, individual lesson plans, and assessment ideas. We are willing to share teaching resources, materials, and practices.

Big Idea #3: A Focus on Results

- What does this idea mean?
  “Professional learning communities judge their effectiveness on the basis of results” (DuFour 10).

- What does this idea mean for our first-year composition PLC?
  We will assess how and in what ways our students have (or have not) learned our shared learning outcome in our focus project. We will provide “proof” of learning by collecting student work and/or reflective writings by students and ourselves.

Appendix B

"Four Blocks for Building a Professional Learning Community"
Handout for PLC Group Members

Building Block #1: Mission/Purpose

- Why do we exist?
  - "The mission question challenges members of a group to reflect on the fundamental purpose of the organization, the very reason for its existence. The question asks, ‘Why do we exist?’ ‘What are we here to do together?’ and ‘What is the business of our business?’" (DuFour and Eaker, 2002, p. 58).
- Consider these four mission statements. How does each statement shape the focus of the school employing it?
  1. We believe all kids can learn based on their ability.
  2. We believe all kids can learn if they take advantage of the opportunities to learn.
  3. We believe all kids can learn and we will accept responsibility for ensuring their growth.
  4. We believe all kids can learn and we will establish high standards of learning that we expect all students to achieve. (DuFour and Eaker, 2002, pgs. 59-60).

Building Block #2: Vision

- What do we hope to become?
  - "Whereas mission establishes an organization’s purpose, vision instills an organization with a sense of direction. It asks, ‘If we are true to our purpose now, what might we become at some point in the future?’ Vision presents a realistic, credible, attractive future for the organization – future that is better and more desirable in significant ways than existing conditions" (DuFour and Eaker, 2002, pg. 62).
- What is our school’s “vision?” What is the “vision” for our first-year writing program?

Building Block #3: Values

- How must we behave in order to make our shared vision a reality?
  - "While a mission statement asks the school to consider why it exists, and a vision statement asks what it might become, a statement of core values asks people to clarify how they intend to make their shared vision a reality" (DuFour and Eaker, 2002, pg. 88).
- What attitudes, behaviors, and commitments must we have to achieve our vision?

Building Block #4: Goals

- Which steps will we take first, and when?
  - "The fourth building block in creating a professional learning community calls for establishing priorities…Goals represent measurable milestones that can be used to assess progress in advancing toward a vision" (DuFour and Eaker, 2002, pg. 100).
- What is a realistic, attainable student learning goal for our group?

Appendix C

Instructor Reflection Questions #1:
Pre-PLC Experiences/Philosophy for Teaching Composition

(Please answer the following questions before our first meeting. I’m asking these questions in order to gather some background information about all participants. In my dissertation, I will use pseudonyms for each participant in order to keep your identities confidential. Of course, if you have any questions, please let me know).

1. Please describe your philosophy for teaching first-year composition.

2. Please describe some experiences or people that have influenced your philosophy for teaching first-year composition.

3. Describe how you currently develop an understanding of your students’ knowledge of writing and/or the first-year writing program’s student learning outcomes.
Appendix D

Instructor Reflection Questions #2:
Problem-Solving Classroom Issues in First-Year Composition

Please answer the following questions in “narrative” form. I’ll provide a few sub-questions to help guide your answers, but please don’t feel obligated to respond separately to each one (or, if any of the sub-questions don’t pertain to you, feel free to ignore them).

1. Describe one teaching experience (prior to participating in this PLC) in which you faced a “difficult” situation (i.e. conflict with a student, difficulty with a project, etc.).

   Explain how the difficult situation played out in your classroom. How did you handle it? What were the student(s) reaction(s) to your response? How long did this situation last?

2. Explain how you resolved the “difficult” situation described above.

   Who, if anyone, did you seek for assistance? Did anyone help you understand or clarify the situation for yourself or for the students? What was the outcome of this situation? Did it affect anyone else besides you and the student(s)? What was the outcome / how was it resolved?

3. Please give a general description of your “working relationship(s)” with other 1050 instructors prior to participating in this PLC.
Appendix E

Instructor Reflection Questions #3:
Reflecting on the PLC as a Professional Development Model

Please take a few minutes to reflect on your experiences working within the PLC model this semester. As a researcher, I am interested in hearing your individual experiences as a teacher/participant. I am also interested in hearing your critiques of the model – what insights and/or advice you might have for further usage of such a model within a first-year composition program.

1. Please identify a single aspect of the PLC experience that you found most beneficial in terms of offering you support as a composition instructor (e.g. regular meetings, specific discussions, doing a teaching portfolio, focusing on learning outcomes, other...).

Specifically, what did you learn as an instructor from the PLC aspect you identified above.

2. Please describe how participating in the PLC has or has not affected your teaching philosophy as a composition instructor (You may want to refer back to your initial teaching philosophy you submitted to me).

(If you can think of a specific example that illustrates this point, please describe it).

3. Please describe how participating in the PLC has or has not affected your classroom practices as a composition instructor.

(If you can think of a specific example that illustrates this point, please describe it).

4. Please describe how participating in the PLC has or has not affected your expertise in the teaching of composition.

5. Would you recommend that a first-year composition program adopt this model? Please explain... What modifications/changes to this model would you recommend to a first-year composition program director?
Appendix F

First-Year Composition Student Learning Outcomes

1. Identifying Genres:
   - Students should be able to identify the features of multiple genres, and articulate (through verbal or written communication) the differences that separate writing genres (should include both academic and non-academic genres).
   - Students should be able to document (through verbal or written communication) how the features of a particular genre work to shape the genre’s content, style, and structure through visual, conceptual, stylistic constraints, as well as through the expectations of the reader/user.
   - Students should be able to demonstrate (through verbal or written communication) how choices in their own writing either conform (or don’t) to the established features of the genre in which they are working.
   - Students should be able to compare how the features of different genres shape content (and knowledge-making) in different ways.

2. Creating Content:
   - Students should be able to create content in multiple genres.
   - NOTE: Although students may not necessarily be able to create flawless versions of an unfamiliar genre, they should at least be able to create content and shape it according to the features of a genre, and discuss/reflect on how well their work fits/or doesn’t the framework of the genre.
   - Students should be able to employ cognitive/conceptual skills related to argument and analysis.
   - NOTE: Project genres for the course should include discussion of these skills.

3. Organizing Information in Multiple Genres:
   - Students should be able to identify the organizational structures that govern different kinds of writing genres.
   - NOTE: While this knowledge can be based on different academic and non-academic genres, student learning should definitely include the ability to organize traditional-style writing genres using features such as clearly delineated topics for paragraphs, creating effective thesis statements, integrating transition statements to create logical flow, etc.
Students should also be able to identify and articulate the differences in organizational technique that apply to various writing genres.

4. Technology/Media:
   • Students should be able to identify the technologies (print or digital) and tools necessary to produce a text in a given genre.
   • Students should be able to decide on and use appropriate digital and print technologies to produce a genre (based on the genre’s required features).
   • Students should be able to demonstrate (through written or verbal communication) how a given text is affected by the use of different technologies or media (in terms of its conception, production, and distribution, as well as the potential ways the text may be taken up by users).

5. The Trajectories of Literate Activity:
   • Students should be able to trace the trajectories of a text (the path a text takes in its production, distribution, and use) in reference to the context and history that shape a genre in a particular ways.
   • This includes the way a particular instance of text is shaped by interactions with people, materials, and technologies; the social and cultural forces that shape how a genre is understood and identified; and the potential uses (both intended and unintended) that reader/users may devise for the text and its content.

6. Flexible Research Skills:
   • Students should be able to demonstrate knowledge of how to find a variety of source materials for research purposes. This should include using digital databases, print material, and archival resources.
   • Students should demonstrate an awareness of the various methods which can be used to collect data (e.g., experiment, observation, various kinds of survey, and interview methods).

7. Using Citation Formats and Citing Source Material in Multiple Genres:
   • Students should be able to cite sources correctly according to one or more academic citation formats (MLA, APA, CBE, Chicago Manual of Style).
   • Students should be able to integrate source material into their written projects in ways appropriate to the projects’ genre(s). This includes the ability to cite material correctly, to quote and paraphrase source material, and to effectively integrate source material to support an argument, persuasive goal, or analysis.
Students should be able to investigate and demonstrate how different methods of citing source material are shaped by the goals and intentions embedded in the citation style.

8. Grammatical Usage and Sentence Structure:

- Students should be able to identify how specific genres are defined, in part through the use of sentence structure, grammar, punctuation, and vocabulary.

- Students should demonstrate the ability to make informed decisions regarding the appropriate sentence structure, grammar, punctuation, and vocabulary in their own writing (based on an assessment of the various genre features required in a particular writing situation).

- Students should be able to identify the match between an example of a genre that they’ve produced and a representative example of that same genre.

- Students should be able to identify in their own writing projects the aspects of sentence structure, grammar, punctuation, and vocabulary which require improvement, and demonstrate through multiple revisions the ability to address these problem areas.
Appendix G

PLC Teaching Portfolio Requirements

The teaching portfolio you create for the focus project will provide a means for collecting assessment data. This portfolio will also serve as a means for you to organize your teaching materials, analyze your teaching methods, and reflect upon your experiences working collaboratively and independently as an instructor.

Contents of your portfolio:

1. **Overview** *(Total: 2-4 pages)*
   a. Brief description of course, students and focus project.
   b. Brief description of how this project fits into the course.
   c. Learning outcome being assessed in this project.

2. **Reflective statement**
   a. Challenges you discovered in teaching this project and how you addressed them. *(1-2 pages)*
   b. Description of assessment used in this project *(You can write this as a narrative, describing the types of assessments you used. Or, you can simply include copies of specific assessments and label these assessments. For example, you might include a free-write and label it “Formative Assessment: Used on the first day of Project 3 to determine students’ understanding of Genre X.”)* *(2-3 pages)*
   c. Analysis of student learning. *(Here you need to simply give a brief description of what you feel your students learned in this project. For example, in what ways did they meet the learning outcome you had assigned? Were there other skills they learned? What did you discover about your students from the different assessments?)* *(2-3 pages)*
   d. Analysis of student feedback. *(This may or may not be applicable. If, for example, your students write a final reflection about the project, you may comment on their reflections here. Or, if you do some kind of questionnaire with your students, this might be a good place to report on their feedback.)* *(1-2 pages)*
   e. Reflective summary of assignment. *(Here you can talk about how teaching this assignment now has been different from other semesters when you taught it, or you can reflect on how your experience teaching the project seems similar/different from your students’ learning experience.)* *(2 pages)*

3. **Artifacts**
   a. Syllabus for course.
   b. Focus project assignment sheet, project notes/lesson plans, student handouts.
   c. Selection of student work. *(For the purposes of my research, this is optional. However, you might want to collect some student work for your personal use, such as to use in your portfolio if you apply for teaching jobs.)*
   d. Pre- and post-surveys, questionnaires, if appropriate. *(This may be optional. For your personal portfolio, you may want to keep your student evaluations at the end of the semester and place these here.)*
Appendix H

Chris' Formative Assessment Protocol

Description of Assessment: This assessment was used on the first day of the focus project to determine students' understanding of "genre."

Student Instructions: On a scale of 1 to 10 (where 1 = not confident at all & 10 = very confident), how much confidence do you have in the ability to do the following kinds of work:

1. Creating a specifically formatted document on a computer: ____________
2. Integrating graphics into a document: ____________
3. Conducting formal research on the history of a genre: _________
4. Conducting formal research on the history of a genre: _________
5. Creating a piece of original writing in the style of a chosen genre: _________

*What one element of writing, genre, critical thinking, etc. would you most like to have specific classroom instruction about?
Appendix I

Chris' Summative Assessment Protocol

Description of Assessment: This assessment was used on the final day of the focus project to assess skills students acquired.

Student Instructions: On a scale of 1 to 10 (where 1 = not confident at all & 10 = very confident), how much confidence do you have in the ability to do the following kinds of work:

1. Creating a specifically formatted document on a computer: ________________
2. Integrating graphics into a document: ____________
3. Conducting formal research on the history of a genre: ____________
4. Conducting formal research on the history of a genre: ____________
5. Creating a piece of original writing in the style of a chosen genre: ____________

*What one element of writing, genre, critical thinking, etc. did you show the most improvement in through this project?
Appendix J

Approval Letter from the Human Subjects International Review Board

Date: October 19, 2009

To: Jonathan Bush, Principal Investigator
   Erin Bentley, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number: 09-10-04

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled “Professional Learning Communities and First-Year Composition Instructors” has been approved under the expedited category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note that you may only conduct this research exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project. You must also seek reapproval if the project extends beyond the termination date noted below. In addition if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: October 19, 2010
WORKS CITED


Smith, B. L. (2001). The Challenge of Learning Communities as a Growing National Movement. *Peer Review*, 4-8


