

# Effective professional learning communities? The possibilities for teachers as agents of change in schools

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The concept of the professional learning community (PLC) has been embraced widely in schools as a means for teachers to engage in professional development leading to enhanced pupil learning. However, the term has become so ubiquitous it is in danger of losing all meaning, or worse, of reifying ‘teacher learning’ within a narrowly defined ambit which loses sight of the essentially contestable concepts which underpin it. The primary aim of this paper is therefore to (re-)examine the assumptions underpinning the PLC as a vehicle for teacher led change in schools in order to confront and unsettle a complacent and potentially damaging empirical consensus around teacher learning. This paper examines the characteristics and attributes of the ‘effective’ professional learning community as identified in the literature, drawing out the tensions and contradictions embodied in the terms professional, learning and community. The paper considers the implications of this analysis for practice, and concludes by offering some insights into the nature of ‘school improvement’, and the role of PLCs in realizing this.

## Introduction

Professional learning communities (PLCs) have become almost *de rigueur* in schools as a means to overcome the shortcomings associated with episodic, decontextualized professional development conducted in isolation from practice (Webster-Wright, 2009). However, despite Dufour and Eaker’s (1998, p. xi) assertion that ‘each word of the phrase “professional learning community” has been chosen purposefully’, each is an essentially contestable concept, i.e., one ‘whose proper use involves endless normative debate about its proper use’ (Gallie, cited in Kumm, 2005, p. 273). All three words are therefore deserving of scrutiny since there is a danger that, as Dufour has said more recently, the term PLC has been used so ubiquitously it risks losing all meaning (2004). The concept of the PLC therefore requires a (re)examination, more especially since, in enacting new initiatives, schools tend towards de-problematisation through what might be termed pedagogisation, the processing of complex concepts for consumption by learners (Watson, 2010). This tendency is also apparent in some of the research literature. Desimone (2009, p. 192), for example, argues that ‘as a field we have reached an empirical consensus on a set of core features and a conceptual framework for teacher learning’, an attempt at closure which many would regard as, at the very least, premature. Adopting a contrary stance, Clegg *et al.* (2005,

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p. 149) urge against ‘the cold comfort of final definitions’, suggesting that such a position would ‘prevent learning itself from learning’. The primary aim of this paper is therefore to examine the assumptions underpinning the PLC as a vehicle for teacher led change in schools in order to confront and unsettle a complacent and potentially damaging empirical consensus around teacher learning.

Stoll *et al.* (2006, p. 229) define a PLC as ‘a group of people sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way’ (thereby presenting us with another long list of essentially contestable concepts), the key purpose of which is ‘to enhance teacher effectiveness as professionals, for students’ ultimate benefit’ (*ibid.*). Though the term ‘professional learning community’ appears to have emerged from within the teaching profession itself and those supporting schools (Stoll *et al.*, 2006) it clearly derives from the concept of the ‘learning organization’. The model of the ‘learning organization’ iteratively developed from and enabled a reconceptualisation of the relationship between working, learning and innovation which had traditionally been viewed as in conflict:

Work practice is generally viewed as conservative and resistant to change; learning is generally viewed as distinct from working and problematic in the face of change; and innovation is generally viewed as the disruptive but necessary imposition of change on the other two. To see that working, learning and innovating are interrelated and compatible and thus potentially complementary, not conflicting forces requires a distinct conceptual shift. (Brown & Duguid, 1991, p. 40)

More recently, however, the concept of the learning organization itself has been subject to criticism (Gherardi, 2009). Indeed, Clegg *et al.* (2005) regard the phrase ‘organizational learning’ as an oxymoron which invites a re-examination of both these terms since paradoxically, learning—precisely because it has the potential to introduce disequilibrium—gives rise to disorder. Organization therefore is perhaps better conceived as a fluid and dynamic process of *organizing*, shifting between order and disorder mediated by learning. Further, there is an ambiguity in the phrase ‘organizational learning’ around the question of who or what learns. Does organizational learning refer collectively to the organizational entity itself or to the individuals within it? If we decide that it should encompass both then what is the relationship between these two facets of organizational learning? This question takes us into the realm of social ontology and the distinction between individualists and societists (Schatzki, 2005). Schatzki says that individualists believe that social phenomena can be explained by reference to the properties of individuals while societists take the view that social phenomena are ‘something other than the features of individual people or groups thereof’ (*ibid.*, p. 467). Schatzki himself advocates a ‘third way’ as a means to overcome this dualism which he elaborates in terms of practice theory and ‘site ontology’. Recognising the problematic nature of this, Gherardi and Nicolini (2002, p. 195) have coined the term *learning-in-organizing*, ‘which focuses directly on the process of creating and using knowledge while organizing’. This shift in conceptualisation has brought to the fore the hitherto somewhat disregarded notion of *practice* as ‘embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding’ (Schatzki, 2001, p. 2). Practices are thus ‘social sites in which events, entities and meaning help to compose one another’ (Chia & Holt, 2006, p. 640). This *turn to practice* transforms the notion of knowledge so that it can

no longer be considered as belonging solely to individuals, but instead becomes a property of groups *in conjunction with their material setups* (Schatzki, 2001). Indeed, Gherardi (2001, p. 133) argues that ‘knowledge resides in social relations’ and hence ‘knowing is part of surrendering to a social habit’—an idea which clearly has important implications for any consideration of the PLC.

The mutation of ‘learning organization’ into ‘learning community’ ‘to fit the world of education’ (Vescio *et al.*, 2008, p. 81) perhaps reflects a sensibility in tune with Sergio’s (1994) appropriation (or some would say misappropriation<sup>1</sup>) of Tönnies’s *Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft* (community/society) distinction and his evident distaste for the latter with its ‘contractual’ underpinnings. The term ‘learning organization’ evokes a business orientation that may indeed be seen to be out of place in the world of education, but has nonetheless penetrated it deeply in terms of policy and governance. This gives rise to an interesting tension or dissonance in relation to the *values* espoused by schools, especially in consideration of the importance attached to ‘shared values and vision’ in the working of what Bolam *et al.* (2005) refer to as the ‘effective’ PLC. The shift from *organization* to *community* also introduces an interesting problematic since the dissatisfactions which led to the change from ‘learning organization’ to ‘learning-in-organizing’ find no similar grammatical affordance with ‘community’ which remains stubbornly nounal. This may have implications for the development of the concept of the PLC within the practice turn. Moreover, the concept of community itself has been subject to critique. Fendler (2004), for example, sees in its inclusive embrace sinister traces of its other, exclusion. For Fendler then, community becomes ‘a mechanism of governance and a forum for specifying norms and rules of participation’, which legitimises agencies of control.

The use of the term ‘professional’ in professional learning community also raises questions of inclusion, whether one considers a PLC as a community of professionals learning or as a community in which professional learning takes place. While communities of learning in schools will necessarily involve the participation of teachers as professionals (however defined), there are interesting discussions to be had around wider participation in PLCs and the implications of this for schools. If, on the other hand, ‘professional learning’ is understood as a form of learning undertaken by professionals, then this potentially produces tensions between the processes by and through which this learning is theorized to occur and the pedagogical practices that it gives rise to.

The PLC is therefore a complex phenomenon, each purposefully chosen word of which constitutes an essentially contestable concept but which holistically invites an examination of professional practices and the development of ‘teacher leadership’ in schools. The aim of this paper is therefore to examine the concepts and practices underpinning the PLC as currently conceived and enacted in schools and the role of the PLC in bringing about institutional and educational change. The paper is structured as follows. I first consider the key attributes of the PLC as these appear in the literature, drawing out the tensions and contradictions embodied in the terms professional, learning and community (although I effect a separation of these they are in fact intimately intertwined in the concept of the PLC). I then consider the implications of this analysis for practice, and conclude by offering some comment on ‘continuous school improvement’ and the role of PLCs in realizing this frankly implausible imperative.

### Key characteristics of ‘effective’ professional learning communities

Bolam *et al.* (2005) define the ‘effective’ PLC as one which has: ‘the capacity to promote and sustain the learning of all professionals and other staff in the school community with the collective purpose of enhancing pupil learning’ (*ibid.*, p. 30).

Like much else in educational policy, such as the notion of ‘teacher effectiveness’ and the ubiquitous appeal to ‘excellence’, this statement conceals an essentially empty concept—enhanced pupil learning—behind a normative mask.

In an extensive survey of the literature Bolam *et al.* identified five key characteristics of the effective PLC. Top of their list, reflecting its near ubiquity in the literature, was ‘shared values and vision’. This is the characteristic that perhaps relates most closely to the notion of professionalism in the PLC. Thus, as Allard-Poesi (2005, p. 175) says, ‘Shared goals, roles and the system that requires them (the organization) are created and give substance as people invoke them to justify a collective structure and their interdependent actions, and treat the organization as if it were real’. The invocation of shared vision and values creates a narrative which calls into being the PLC as a body of practice but, since all narratives have the potential to subvert, also threatens to undermine it. This is explored further below.

The next four characteristics identified by Bolam *et al.* can broadly be said to cluster around learning within the PLC, this encompasses:

- Collective responsibility for pupils’ learning.
- Reflective professional inquiry.
- Collaboration focused on learning.
- Group as well as individual professional learning is promoted.

The focus on student learning as the ultimate aim of the PLC is emphasised in the literature. Vescio *et al.* (2008, p. 81) stress ‘clear and consistent focus on student learning’ and reflective dialogue, which leads to ‘extensive and continuing conversations among teachers about curriculum, instruction and student development’. Nelson *et al.* (2010, p. 176) talk about the need to pursue ‘questions about learning goals, instructional practices, and all students’ attainment’. This attempt to set the agenda for PLCs produces tensions in considering the extent to which PLCs can be regarded as having a ‘critical function’ (questioning, for example, essentially contestable concepts), rather than being ‘a vehicle for domesticating students and teachers to conventional forms of schooling’ (Kemmis, 2006, p. 459).

In addition, Bolam *et al.* found three more ‘attributes’ necessary for effective performance of the PLC which broadly relate to the notion of community:

- Inclusive membership.
- Mutual trust, respect and support.
- Openness, networks and partnership.

After the appeal to shared vision and values, the importance of ‘trust’ and ‘openness’ in the working of the PLC perhaps emerge most consistently in the literature. The emphasis on trust, support and openness perhaps reflects a desire to counter the traditional understanding of teaching as a strangely solitary activity, taking place behind closed doors. Thus, Vescio *et al.* (2008, p. 81) refer to PLCs as ‘deprivatizing’

teaching through making it a more public activity. Openness is one of those cosy concepts which suggests niceness but it may also be a form of increased surveillance, a pervasive feature of schools and other work places today.

I now consider these three aspects—shared values and vision; learning within the PLC; and community—in greater detail.

### *Shared values and vision*

The ubiquitous belief in the importance of ‘shared values and vision’ demonstrates just how potent such conformity can be. When this notion is promoted so assiduously in policy and educational research literature it is hardly surprising that it is invoked by actants themselves thereby taking on the characteristic of causal attribute. Thus the appeal to shared vision/values is narratively constructed in reverse as that which explains school effectiveness/improvement (or conversely, its lack as that which accounts for failure). Encouraging belief in the shared vision, underpinned by values held in common, is a key management tool for organizing but this raises important issues in relation to the effective PLC as a means of bringing about educational change not least: what exactly is it that is shared (and how is this sharing accomplished); which (whose) values are valued; and what is the nature of the ‘and’ between vision and values?

Sharing, another concept with cosy connotations, seeks to mask difference, indeed to impose a hegemonic closure on meaning. In the phrase ‘values and vision’ (or sometimes it is vision and values) this is achieved by means of the conjunction ‘and’ which narratively links vision to values creating an unquestionable truth. Lumby (2006, p. 6) contends, however, that this vision is an ‘optical illusion’:

One glance and what appears is the commonly accepted idea of a values and vision driven leadership. Shift the angle slightly, and the picture becomes much more disquieting; schools where the deletion of ‘other’ is disguised as values based inclusion and democracy.

The shared vision may therefore become a means to produce silence, articulating the discursive field around hegemonic signifiers such as ‘learning’ in order to give rise to very particular meanings and pedagogies.

Ironically, this insistence on the sharing of commonly held values masks the presence of incommensurable values evident in educational policies and the practices they give rise to in schools (and which is implicit in the notion of essentially contestable concepts). Indeed, such multiplicity seems inescapable in complex social institutions. Values relate to social and cultural notions of *worth*, i.e., what is worthy. Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) argue that the need to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate actions on the basis of critical justification is a fundamental human capacity. They have developed a ‘sociology of worth’ as worlds or orders providing a framework for such justification. Boltanski and Thévenot identify six different worlds each of which ‘defines the good, the just, and the fair—but according to different criteria of judgement’ (Stark, 2009, p. 12). These worlds are underpinned by incommensurable values and therefore each stands in critical relation to all the others (Annisette & Richardson 2011). The six worlds are: civic; industrial; domestic; market; inspired; and fame. The principles underpinning these worlds are (Annisette & Richardson, 2011; Denis *et al.*, 2007):

- *Civic*: civic duty, the collective good.
- *Industrial*: efficiency, effectiveness, performance.
- *Domestic*: tradition, loyalty, hierarchy.
- *Market*: competition.
- *Inspired*: inspiration, originality.
- *Fame*: public opinion, judgement of others.

Drawing on this analysis we can see how policies which focus on pupil attainment and teacher effectiveness (of the ‘fifteen teacher behaviors for success’ variety —Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011, p. 46), are part of the industrial order of worth while notions of social justice and inclusion belong to the civic world; and schools themselves may appeal to the domestic order, while being obliged to enter the marketplace. Negotiating these multiple rationalities requires compromise so giving rise to ‘conventions’ which bridge different worlds. A convention is ‘an artifact or an object that crystallizes the compromise between various logics in a specific context’ (Denis *et al.*, 2007, p. 192). In schools targets for the reduction of exclusion, for example, could be said to bridge the industrial and the civic worlds. Such compromises between competing logics reduce uncertainty. Though fault lines remain, these are smoothed over facilitating orthodox or normal practices. Indeed, the appeal to shared vision and values might itself be regarded as a ‘master’ convention which functions to bridge orders of worth and so render invisible the tensions and fault lines that pervade complex social institutions.

However, in a further ironic twist, attempts to mask difference through an insistence on a shared adherence to values may actually inhibit organizational change (if not learning) thereby obstructing the ‘continuous school improvement’ the shared vision is intended to bring about. Indeed, it may be argued that it is the very instability arising from the clash of incommensurable values that creates a disturbance or interruption enabling the ‘partially autonomous actor’ as ‘a social actor in a contradictory social world’ to exploit these contradictions (Seo & Creed, 2002, p. 223) and so to become a potential change agent. Thus, while Boltanski and Thévenot’s aim is to arrive at compromise between competing logics in order to reduce uncertainty, others have seen in the theory the opportunity to exploit this uncertainty. Stark (2009), for example, sees the mix of evaluative principles which underlie different orders of worth as opening up opportunities for action. Moreover, he goes on ‘it is precisely this uncertainty that entrepreneurship exploits. *Entrepreneurship is the ability to keep multiple evaluative principles in play and to exploit the resulting friction of their interplay*’ (ibid., p. 23; original emphasis). This gives rise to a ‘productive dissonance’ in an ‘unruly search’ for what is valuable (ibid) which potentially opens the way for new practices to emerge. Creativity thrives on uncertainty thus requiring divergence from shared vision and values, though as a strategy it is not without risk.

### Learning

Much of the literature around teacher CPD situates professional development within a realist ontology of learning which unproblematically defines ‘critical features’ of teacher learning (‘content focus; active learning; coherence; duration; and collective



participation’) in the development of ‘an operational theory of how professional development works to influence teacher and student outcomes’ (Desimone, 2009, p. 183). This model of professional development attempts to reify teacher learning thereby functioning as a ‘pedagogic device’ (Bernstein & Solomon, 1999) which seeks to regulate and circumscribe professional development for the purposes of increasing pupil attainment. This model thus produces congruence between the critical features of professional development, as outlined by Desimone, and the technology of teaching—the process by which knowledge is objectified and transformed for consumption by pupils. In this model of professional development ‘the end or goal of the practice is given in advance, and what is required is finding the most efficient, effective and humane means to meet that end’ (Schwandt, 2005, p. 316). Schwandt (2005, p. 316) refers to the interlocking theoretical assumptions that underpin this view of professional development as ‘Model 1’ in which:

- inquiry is conceived as scientific assessment to enlighten and improve practice;
- practice is instrumental, scientifically-managed and socially efficient;
- learning is principally a cognitive matter, taking place in the mind;
- knowledge is propositional and declarative, to be applied to practice;
- certainty, lack of ambiguity, order, etc, are normative.

This model of professional development is, however, problematic and radically at odds with the notion of professional learning as it is understood within the ‘practice turn’ in which learning and knowledge are held to be both embedded in, and emergent through, ‘shared practice’ as in the case of the PLC. The practice turn ‘deems events, individuals and doings to be manifest instantiations of practice-complexes; ontological priority is accorded to an *immanent logic of practice* rather than to actors and agents’ (Chia & MacKay, 2007, p. 219). Schwandt (2005, p. 321) refers to this as ‘Model 2’ learning in which:

- inquiry supports practical deliberation of means and ends;
- practice is contingent, socially enacted; constitutive of self and other;
- learning is situated, activist and constructionist;
- knowledge is embodied in action, wise judgment;
- disorder, ambiguity, uncertainty are normative

The incommensurability between realist and immanent ontologies of learning produces a paradox which centres on the radical disjunction between professional learning as conceptualised in the ‘practice turn’ and understandings and enactments of pedagogies within the classroom when pupil learning as attainment is considered to be the main aim of teaching. Thus, teacher professional learning may be understood in terms of ‘Model 2’ whereas practice may be rooted in realist ontologies of learning more closely aligned with the concept of learning embodied in ‘Model 1’. The PLC may therefore be regarded as a convention bridging the orders of worth of incommensurable worlds. A number of implications arise from this: the compromise might be accepted and the tensions arising from a community of practitioners learning together in order to reach a pre-specified end or goal ignored or smoothed over. Alternatively, the contradictory logics involved between practice based learning and pedagogisation as the technology of teaching for instrumental ends may give rise to

praxis as politically motivated action (Seo & Creed, 2002). In this way, awareness of discordant values becomes the first step in the process of becoming an agent of change.

### *Community*

I earlier alluded to the possible implications for the PLC of the ‘stubbornly nounal’ qualities of the word ‘community’. The closest to ‘learning-in-organizing’ we can get is ‘learning-in-community’ which, though it does not carry the same nuances of fluidity, perhaps goes some way towards promoting the idea of learning as a process within the PLC. Learning-in-community emphasises collaborative learning and the development of intersubjective (‘shared’) meanings attached to practice. However, like so much else already discussed in this paper, this apparently comfy concept is not without its downside. Thus, Pedder and Opfer (2011, p. 386) refer to the ‘Goldilocks model’ of collaboration: too much is stifling, too little results in teacher isolation and inhibits growth but ‘just enough collaboration and teachers receive the stimulation and support from colleagues necessary for change’—which begs a number of questions too obvious to go into here. However, it is not just that too much collaboration stifles individuals but that such collaboration can give rise to PLCs that become inward looking in effect preventing organizational learning and adaptability, particularly if this is combined with a lack of turnover of membership. James March presents evidence for the paradoxical finding that the learning rate of an organization is inversely related to the knowledge held by its members and thus ‘the development of knowledge may depend on maintaining an influx of the naïve and ignorant’ (March, 1991, p. 86). This is because experienced ‘old timers’ know more but contribute relatively little to the collective knowledge of the organization whereas novices ‘know less on average’ but what they do know is more likely to be novel and therefore contributes more to organizational knowledge. This contribution declines as the individual becomes socialised within the organization and adapts to organizational norms (see Watson, in press). There is a danger in PLCs that local norms of practice become reified through consensus ‘in effect replacing the isolated classroom teacher with the isolated teacher group and balkanized workplace’ (Little, 2003, p. 939). This is the potential problem with ‘learning rounds’ (which draws explicitly on the model of clinical teaching rounds in hospitals) an approach in which teachers observe each other’s lessons which has become widespread in the UK, particularly in Scotland (Menter & Hulme, 2011).

PLCs place great emphasis on mutual trust (while ‘conflict’ seems never to be cited as a key characteristic of effective PLCs). It seems that a little bit of the Goldilocks phenomenon is apparent here too. Thus, Sundaramurthy and Lewis (2003, p. 407) argue, that ‘too much trust’ arising from strong social ties ‘may encourage extreme cohesion’ and so give rise to dysfunctionality, particularly in the form of ‘groupthink’ (Janis, 1972). Conversely, conflict may introduce diversity which enhances organizational learning but can ‘trigger political battles that undermine social ties and fuel distrust’ (ibid.). Sundaramurthy and Lewis go on, ‘the functional coexistence of trust and distrust lies at the crux of high-performing teams’ (ibid.). This implies that PLCs therefore need to develop knowledge about whom to trust and whom they need to monitor closely, and under what circumstances.



Community embodies notions of belonging and this necessarily involves consideration of identities. Belonging, however, also produces paradoxical tensions with learning. Thus ‘strong’ organisational identities, likely to be regarded as beneficial in terms of loyalty, can be detrimental to organisations because they inhibit change. Identification with the organisation ‘provides a sense of unity that is useful for binding people together in collective change efforts. On the other hand, less identification may be needed to generate the possibilities for change outside the bounds of the organization’s current reality’ (Fiol, 2002, p. 653). The implication is that less commitment, resistance even, may foster greater adaptability and hence success.

Community thus starts to present as an ironic concept in which collaboration leads to isolation; cohesion and trust undermine learning; openness leads to surveillance; and commitment reduces organizational adaptability. A further and intrinsic irony of course is that as an inclusive body a community necessarily excludes. In examining PLCs, therefore, the question of who is excluded—where the boundaries are drawn—becomes a crucial issue in considering the nature of practice in schools, i.e., who partakes in the practices that constitutively produce the organization and give rise to its reality? Clearly, pupils enter into education practices in schools, indeed, they form one aspect of the materiality of teacher practices: ‘it is thus as part of educational practices that teachers and students coexist via particular chains of action and particular teleological commonalities and orchestrations’ (Schatzki, 2005, p. 472). This raises the question as to what extent pupils should contribute to PLCs in schools? Bolam *et al.* (2005, p. 149) allude to the importance of ‘pupil voice’ in their case studies of PLCs:

... staff in the case study schools were, to varying extents and using a range of different methods, seeking to take account of pupils’ views and opinions about their own learning and about the school more generally... Hence, we suggest that this aspect be included in future thinking and practice about the membership and operation of PLCs.

‘Pupil voice’, defined as consultation, therefore becomes part of the material arrangements that constitute educational practices. It is therefore enacted within the mesh of practice and is given recognition and constituted within it in ways that are produced through the shared practical understanding of teachers. In this way what is sayable, and crucially what is *heard*, are circumscribed by teachers and hence ‘pupil voice’ becomes a means by which pupils may be effectively silenced within schools.

### **Effective PLCs and teachers as agents of change**

The practice turn understands practice as ‘shared practical understanding’. As aspects of practice PLCs are enacted in particular ways by teachers, but as this paper has shown PLCs are not unproblematic in either their conceptualisation or in the practices of which they are constituted. At the heart of this problematic is the question of values and the recognition of the range of legitimate values that subtend a complex social organization such as a school. This presents something of a paradox. The appeal to shared values articulated within a single vision for the school creates the very organizational reality within which professional practice is realised and enacted—indeed made possible—but by doing this the shared vision imposes a rationality and a

direction which suppresses possibilities for change. This paper provides a means for understanding how PLCs could become motivated and seek to initiate change within the institution through an awareness and creative use of the dissonance arising from the coexistence of justified competing/conflicting values. Recognising what is discordant in values may therefore act as a driver for change. However, it does not imply that all PLCs are motivated to seek this kind of change and indeed PLCs may function as a means to silence dissatisfaction through the hegemonic appeal to ‘community’ and its normalising function as arbiter of ideological control. Moreover, as this paper has also shown, the easy assumptions that underpin the notion of community are not self-evident truths which lead inexorably to enhanced professional learning and school improvement.

The pervasive discourse of the ‘effective school’ and more latterly the ‘school improvement’ movement with its drive for ‘continuous school improvement’—a slogan whose simplistic impossibility would render it risible had it not been spoken seriously by so many otherwise rational professionals—may impose a narrowly instrumental or technicist agenda focused on pupil attainment as the legitimate aim of the PLC which suppresses the search for diversity, creativity and adaptability, thereby reducing its effectiveness. In saying this I do not contend that schools should not seek to ‘improve’ or that attainment is not a legitimate goal of education. I merely wish to point out that such an approach is likely to be limiting. Schools as organizations need to be more aware of the complexities inherent in their task and to search for ways to increase adaptability, focusing simultaneously on exploration and exploitation (March, 1991) and recognising that:

Learning is not something that is done to organizations, nor is it something an organization does; rather, learning and organizing are seen as mutually constitutive and unstable, yet pragmatic, constructs that might enable a dynamic appreciation of organizational life. (Clegg *et al.*, 2005, p. 150)

The PLC has a potentially significant role to play in these dynamic organisational processes, destabilising the rigidities with which the school as institution surrounds itself—but in order to achieve this it might need to re-examine the meanings attached to those three purposefully chosen words.

#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> Fendler (2006, p. 316) writes ‘Readers familiar with Tönnies’s original work might be surprised at the ways these 19th-century concepts have been appropriated and transformed from analytic descriptors to normative values in educational inquiry’.

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