Leadership Dilemmas:
Captured Wisdom of Social Learning Leaders

By Claudette Rasmussen

_A Promising Beginning, A Puzzling End_¹

We had a very productive first few months of the college and career ready community of practice. A community-created Core Message, Blueprint for Action, and organizational asset maps appeared to strike a good balance between meeting the needs and interests of the seven urban community-based organization members and the expectations of the sponsoring foundation. We completed our design and start-up phases on time and were getting ready to begin the implementation phase. I was excited about helping this community to move forward. My commitment and approach to the work had been affirmed by active collaboration and positive feedback from the foundation’s executive director.

Shortly after the holidays, the executive director scheduled a conference call. It was time to resume planning for implementation, I thought. After our usual light-hearted banter, the director acknowledged that this would be a difficult conversation. As a knot formed in my stomach, he told me that the board of trustees had chosen not to support the extension of my contract because the trustees felt that funds should be given to “organizations working on the ground” rather than to a consultant. I asked if there was something I might have done differently. The executive director said no; if anything, he felt it was he who had not sufficiently communicated the importance of a community of practice to the board. Although I ended the call calmly and graciously, I was taken aback, deeply disappointed, and sad.

Should I have seen this coming? Was there something I could have done as a social learning leader to prevent this abrupt end to my consultation? To support transition to another form of leadership or to provide closure? What would happen to the community? To the aspirations members had for themselves and their students? Had their hopes been raised with little promise of realizing them?

Compelled to Reflect, Seeking Insight. These wide-ranging feelings and thoughts and my inclination to look within compelled me to reflect upon social learning leadership, how I have become a social learning leader, and what I have learned along the way.

I come from a close-knit family in a rural Midwest village. Community, capacity building, reflection, and productivity have been “values to live by” throughout my life. Communicated by example within my family, these values were reinforced and extended by social-political leaders like Martin Luther King, Junior, and by several great educators who have been mentors and co-leaders in my professional life.

¹ The blue italicized text conveys the author’s perceptions of and personal experiences in a college and career ready community of practice. The author alternates between those community experiences and reflections upon social learning leadership – her own and those of 14 highly experienced leaders. The reflections and insights of social learning leaders are represented in black text.
I trace my initial interest in social learning leadership back to my teens. In seventh grade, I read Twenty Years at Hull-House, by Jane Addams. I was so inspired by this social reformer who established the first settlement house in the United States in 1889 and was the first American woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931 that I decided to become a social worker. I later enrolled in a undergraduate professional social work program. During my senior internship with an inner-city childcare agency, I was given the responsibility of teaching the agency’s four most problematic children and providing casework services to their families. It was a “sink or swim” situation with little support. I instinctively focused on each of the children as learners, taking my cues from them and the ways in which their contexts affected their learning. The breakthroughs that I made with them in the next four months opened my eyes to the strategic impact of educators on enabling learning and developing the potential of learners.

That field experience led to a graduate degree in education and a number of work experiences in which I developed my classroom practice and charted a course toward professional learning and social learning. I became a constructivist teacher and leader focused on practices that enabled individuals and groups to construct meaning and knowledge in areas of genuine interest to them. I started every school year by intentionally creating a learner-centered classroom climate that supported problem solving and critical thinking. Those practices became part of a National Science Foundation-funded project: Problem Solving and Critical Thinking in Mathematics and Science, a professional development model that from 1986–91 reflected many of the professional learning and student standards of today.

When I joined the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, I was able to translate my vision of learning into Indicators of Engaged Learning (1995) and to describe my classroom practice and the practices of other teachers in a book on problem-based learning, Real-Life Problem Solving: A Collaborative Approach to Interdisciplinary Learning (1997).

Since then, many of the learning activities that supported inquiry, problem-solving, knowledge creation, and community building in my classrooms have been further informed by my study of research and effective practice. I have actively applied evidence-based practices to other designs for professional learning, especially job-embedded professional learning, and to professional learning within continuous improvement and teaching effectiveness systems. A web-based handbook on Professional Learning Communities, created for the national Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement (2009), and a brief titled Generating Teaching Effectiveness: The Role of Job-Embedded Learning in Teacher Evaluation (2012), are two examples of my work in systems where professional learning is intentionally connected to other elements of the system.

I have always been committed to learning from and with others—whether students in the classroom, educators in professional learning contexts, or policy makers and technical assistance providers in federal and state departments of education—and to engaging learners in the design of the tools, processes, and initiatives being created for their use. Thus, I have formed client-based design teams, leadership teams, and cross-stakeholder teams for nearly every major project I have led. The single most successful on-the-ground project was a three-year contract with the education system of the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI). The project brought the USVI into full compliance with federal requirements for a continuous improvement process at the territorial, district, and school levels and resulted in substantial achievement gains in 19 of the territory’s 33 schools. A key to the project’s success and sustainability was its bottom-up approach, including
work with a cross-level design team with substantial principal and teacher leader representation that ensured that professional learning was culturally responsive, achievable, and intentionally building their capacity for continuous improvement.

One of my most exciting and innovative collaborations was with the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) beginning in late 2010. For more than 18 months, stakeholders representing 15 roles in the MDE educational system worked together to create Michigan’s first professional learning policy statement that addresses quality indicators of an effective system and to develop innovation configuration maps designed to guide stakeholders in meeting the indicators. The project also motivated state board approval of the Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011). The project led to a new way of working with MDE stakeholders, some of whom are still engaged in the implementation of its resulting policy.

Intent on translating professional learning practices into useful interactive tools and processes, I have worked with state and national clients to develop toolkits. These have included Blueprints: A Practical Toolkit for Designing and Facilitating Professional Development (2000), Teacher to Teacher: Reshaping Instruction Through Lesson Study (2002), and a mentor-induction toolkit for the Promoting Teacher Effectiveness in Adult Education Project (2013).

Approximately two years ago, recognizing the reciprocal benefits of professional learning communities and communities of practice and of face-to-face and online learning, I identified social learning as an important area of professional growth. That recognition led me to the State of the Art BETreat and the Social Learning Leadership certificate program and provided me with yet another opportunity to learn by doing and to become immersed in CoPs in the certificate program and in my workplace at American Institutes for Research (AIR).

And so my thoughts return to the college and career ready community, my first CoP at AIR. I can honestly say that I was very intentional in applying the best of what I had learned to that community. I formed a design team comprised of the foundation’s executive director and a leader from each of the seven organizations. I facilitated their development of a core message in a way that tapped into their passion and values related to the work. Their expressed desire to build relationships with one another led to meetings at each of their sites, eating local ethnic food, and using asset maps and aspirational stories of their students to get acquainted with the work of each organization.

I also felt I had built a strong relationship with the executive director. I took time to understand the history and context of the family foundation, and I participated in the kick-off meeting for the initiative. Once the community was underway, I was very transparent in my thinking and planning for the work of the community and open to the director’s ideas. At my prompting, we often shared or alternated the facilitation role. I did wonder at times if I had gaged who should facilitate what optimally. We weren’t always exactly on the same page but we were at ease self-correcting, so I wasn’t too concerned about it.

I did have one unresolved concern, though...an inkling really. One of the family members of the foundation was at the last community meeting where members were sharing their small group work plans. After listening to them, he complimented the members by saying that he felt the individual organizations knew what they needed to do. And I wondered to myself if he understood the potential power of this collective. Not wanting to disrupt the flow of the meeting,
I thought I would talk with him after we adjourned. But he grabbed his helmet and bike and left the meeting before its end. And I’m left wondering, could that uneasy feeling have become the knot in my stomach?

Social Learning Leadership Dilemmas: Addressing the Gaps. The challenging experience of the college and career ready community of practice set my project for the social learning leadership certificate program on a new trajectory: to explore leadership dilemmas and potential solutions.

I was surprised to learn that a high percentage of communities come to a premature end, leaving their leaders and participants without closure. I also learned that little has been written about this in the literature.

Consequently, I engaged 14 social learning leaders from the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia to share stories about dilemmas related to premature changes in their leadership and lack of closure in their communities. I also asked them what we, as social learning leaders, might do proactively to scaffold conversations or facilitate decision-making by sponsors and others who support communities of practice.

The structured conversations elicited several complex and emotionally-laden experiences from their work in corporations, universities, state departments, not for profit education agencies, and community based organizations over the years. Multiple leadership issues arose, as did cautions, considerations and possible solutions. Nine pivotal aspects of social learning leadership, as described in Table 1 below, emerged from the deep and rich experiences of these leaders.

Table 1. Pivotal Aspects of Social Learning Leadership

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| 1. Need to further craft their language of social learning leadership to effectively convey both the logic and the social learning perspectives inherent in the work. | ▪ Language that can support a sponsor’s understanding of return on investment.  
▪ Language that enables sponsors, particularly business people, to better understand the personal, often “spiritual”, impact that communities have on individuals.  
▪ Common, differing, and changing expectations of community stakeholders and the bases for those expectations.  
▪ How we talk about the range of observable indicators of value of the community, especially when there is a possible mismatch between the sponsor’s expectation and the community’s behavior. |
| 2. Must develop a deep understanding of the context and culture of the community and its organization(s) and of the social learning leader’s position within the organization and community. | ▪ The nature and health of the culture of the sponsoring organization(s).  
▪ The role of organizational leaders and their level of vision and advocacy for the community.  
▪ Recognition of and authority vested in the community. |
### Social learning leaders...

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<td>position of the social learning leader.</td>
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<td>▪ Possible strategic alliances and influential voices within the sponsoring organization(s) that might lend credibility to the efforts of the social learning leader.</td>
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3. **Need to assume responsibility for initiating conversations and crafting agreements with sponsors that articulate their understanding of community development over time, expectations and indicators of value, sponsor roles and the roles of other stakeholders, and the use of resources, among other things.**

| ▪ Opportunities to conduct coaching within the context of initial conversations that enable sponsors to: learn more about collaboration; develop a common understanding of this new and different kind of work; realize that communities can be fragile and sensitive to changes in the vertical; adjust to changing community needs; and maintain focus on the mission of the community. |
| ▪ Ways to sketch common agreements and expectations that represent how sponsors can support the community in flexible and dynamic ways. |

4. **Need to create a learning space for timely conversations with sponsors and managers.**

| ▪ The importance of ongoing communications with sponsors and other people in leadership, particularly around what goes on in the community and expectations and indicators of the value of the community. |
| ▪ Opportunities to conduct coaching about the effects of sponsor interactions on community members, including who needs to be in the “room”? When? In what capacity? What needs to be said, and what should go unspoken? |

5. **Have a central role in engaging sponsors and other stakeholders during the startup of a community and throughout the life of the community.**

<p>| ▪ Moderating a passionate endorsement of CoPs with a realistic representation of their challenges and potential accomplishments in the course of securing sponsor buy-in. |
| ▪ The sponsor’s understanding of the difficulty of asking communities to commit and the risks associated with sponsor “hedged support”. |
| ▪ Opportunities to overcome stakeholders’ wait and see attitude by inviting community members who are “all in” to share the benefits with reluctant members or by setting incremental, achievable goals. |
| ▪ Ongoing need for different degrees and means of engagement. |
| ▪ Ongoing opportunities to assess... |</p>
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| 6. Have responsibility for conveying the developmental process of the community and advocating for the community over time. | • Making a strong case in support of the community at every stage of development, acknowledging its promise and aspirations, fragility at times, learning-value cycles, practices and accomplishments, and its impact on the way members experience work and one another.  
• Making a strong case in support of the community when change is underway.  
• Opportunities to conduct coaching with the sponsor or executive director around a discourse of success, taking into account the community’s accomplishments, weak points, and options. |
| 7. Must understand the level of maturity of the CoP in relation to changes in leadership, roles, or resources. | • Opportunities for leveraging and brokering resources when funding is at risk.  
• Involving enough people—who get enough value from the community—in leadership in order to support community sustainability, despite the changes.  
• The benefits of tapping into all stakeholders in relation to the organization’s level of maturity.  
• When it is appropriate to shift away from growing a community and toward supporting their accomplishments, particularly during a short funding cycle.  
• Fidelity of mission so that when dealing with change and risk, the community does not become too unfocused to be effective. |
| 8. Are personally impacted by the transfer of leadership or ownership of a community; they, in turn, can have a positive impact on the effective transfer of the community. | • Difficulties in dealing with changes in leadership and the relatively common occurrence of a community being removed from the social learning leader’s responsibility, even when the community has been highly successful.  
• The positioning of the CoP within a changing organization and the possibility that the community and/or the social learning leader may be set up or scapegoated.  
• Differing expectations of partners, some of whom may see themselves more as competitors then collaborators.  
• The possibility that the social learning leader... |
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<td>did the job so well that the organization wants to put the CoP into another structure where it will have more visibility, opportunity to scale up, and/or provide other benefits to the organization.</td>
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<td>▪ Anticipating the transition, identifying areas in which the community can move forward and become more innovative in relation to the transition and finding a way to play a meaningful role in the transition.</td>
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<td>9. Need the support of other social learning leaders and need to take care of themselves, given the emotional impact and intellectual demands of social learning leadership.</td>
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<td>▪ The benefits of having a CoP for social learning leaders to provide emotional support and address problems unique to the role.</td>
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<td>▪ The importance of social learning leaders developing a balance between idealism and realism in relation to the work.</td>
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<td>▪ The emotional roller coaster ride that may result from personal investment in the community over the course of its development.</td>
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<td>▪ Their difficulty in dealing with a premature end to a community or a lack of closure for the community.</td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Their need for support to start a new CoP after another has ended; given who we are and what we do as social learning leaders, recognizing that sometimes we just have to take that leap.</td>
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I realize now how important it is for a social learning leader to continually assess and manage what might be paradoxical tensions between the interests of the sponsor and the interests of the community. Viewing conversations with the executive director as “coaching opportunities” that he, in turn, could have with trustees might have been helpful in informing and addressing differing expectations. It likely would have helped me anticipate any dual purposes for the family foundation member’s visit and to view that visit as a coaching opportunity, too.

Now I better understand the precarious nature of a consultant position within the culture of the foundation. I also recognize that although the executive director held strong beliefs about the benefits of collaboration and the viable role of CoPs within philanthropic organizations, that was not a value embedded in the foundation’s culture.

Though my time spent with the college and career ready community was less than a year, I was personally very invested in them and their vision. I realize now that my disappointment and sadness at the end of the community was for them and for me. The executive director has shared that the community is “on a hiatus”; still I hope that they will resume their collective work and
realize their aspirations. As for me, conversations with other social learning leaders have been cathartic. They have generated valuable knowledge and provided precious social and emotional support.

Social Learning Continues, Applying it to Work and Life. What I learned from deep reflection on my values and practice and systematic analysis of the values and practices of other social learning leaders continues to enlighten and enrich my work and personal growth.

During the past several months at AIR, I have provided consultation to colleagues leading an online CoP by using some of the successful learning activities of the college and career ready community. I have applied design skills to the development of a networked learning service line and led a team in the development of a district toolkit for a Connected Educator project that was recently delivered to the U.S. Department of Education.

The Moving Toward the Goal toolkit (2014), in many ways, represents a hands-on synthesis of evidence-based knowledge and practice around professional learning, continuous improvement, and social learning leadership. It invites district leadership teams to integrate online CoPs and social learning networks with face-to-face professional learning aligned with improvement goals. It provides teams with a decision-making process, four tools, numerous district examples, and a brief describing the evidence base that supports integration. Conditions that support social learning are embedded in a professional learning readiness tool. Characteristics of high-quality social learning activities are reflected in a professional learning strategies tool and an online professional learning quality checklist. The value creation framework (Wenger, Trayner, & deLaat, 2011) for assessing social learning is incorporated into an evaluation tool. I expect to make connections with this toolkit and to continue to build social learning leadership knowledge and practice in the course of upcoming projects.

In many ways, my work for the Social Learning Leadership Certificate Program, summarized in these pages, has brought me full circle in my personal life. It has affirmed and extended the influence of people and events in my life and of those “values to live by”—community, capacity building, reflection, and productivity. What began as a desire to lead by example in my close-knit family and in the life of my rural Midwestern village has been fortified over time by my leadership experiences and the captured wisdom of social learning leaders. The process of applying social learning leadership has become a model that I can affirm and extend with neighbors, friends, and family.
References


