

Utilizing Professional Learning Community Concepts and Social Networking for State Advocacy: The Arkansas Case

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This article provides an overview of National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) state affiliate, Arkansas Professors of Educational Administration's (ARPEA), activities, accomplishments, and advocacy efforts. Faced with numerous changes being implemented in education in the state, it became imperative for ARPEA's Executive Board to overcome barriers standing in the way of sharing information in a timely manner, developing a collective viewpoint, and advocating on behalf of the state's leadership preparation programs. As with most state affiliates, geographical distance between institutions, finding common time to meet regularly, and learning collectively about state-wide issues constituted the a need for pre-service programs to develop a unified voice. ARPEA began to take advantage of social networking technologies and professional learning community practices on a statewide level. ARPEA began using an online meeting system to build collegial relationship with one another, to provide representation on department of education/state association committees/ad hoc tasks forces, and to collectively advocate for the state's leadership preparation programs.

Educational reform in Arkansas and the nation has been moving at an unprecedented pace. Ed HomeRoom (2013) reported that over the last five years, states and school districts across America have been dealing with an enormous set of urgent challenges. Those challenges include common core standards to better prepare young people to compete in the global economy, developing new assessments, rebuilding accountability systems, and adopting new systems of support and evaluation for teachers and principals (Ed HomeRoom, 2013). Most recently, Arkansas has developed a common superintendent evaluation system based upon the Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium 2008 standards (Arkansas Department of Education, 2014; National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2008). Meeting this historic set of challenges asks more of everybody, including higher education. These state changes necessitated conversations leading to an alteration in the way professors in pre-service preparation programs in the state of Arkansas work with one another to advocate for policy and program development on behalf of the state's future leaders. The National Council of Professors of Educational Administration's (NCPEA) state affiliate, Arkansas Professors of Educational Administration's (ARPEA), made a commitment to adopt characteristics and practices of a professional learning community to meet these challenges.

Theories of situated learning in communities of practice (Lave and Wenger (1991), where learning is developed through social contexts, grounds nearly three decades of research on professional learning communities (PLCs) and provides the theoretical framework for this paper. Stein (1998) defines situated learning as follows:

- (1) Learning is grounded in the actions of everyday situations;
 - (2) knowledge is acquired situationally and transfer only to similar situations;
 - (3) learning is the result of a social process encompassing ways of thinking perceiving, problem solving, and interacting in addition to declarative and procedural knowledge' and
 - (4) learning is not separated from the world of action but exists in robust, complex, and social environments made up of actors, actions, and situations.
- (para. 2)

Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner (2015) offers the following description of communities of practice "as groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (p. 1). Communities of practice, in the context of this paper are PLCs who are actively learning together and working to address real-world problems.

Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, and Thomas (2006) posit, "There is no universal definition of a [sic] professional learning communities" (p. 222). The authors go on to suggest PLCs are "...a group of people sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive learning-oriented growth-promoting way...operating as a collective enterprise" (pp. 222-223). Although there is not a universal definition of a PLC, researchers have identified common features: shared values, mission, beliefs, and understandings; interactions, participation, and interdependence; reflective professional inquiry, individual and group learning; collective responsibilities, and collaboration; meaningful relationships, mutual trust, and respect; continuous improvement with a focus on results; and supportive conditions to sustain the PLC (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Carmeli & Schaubroeck, 2006; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour & Eaker, 2004; DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008; Feger & Arruda, 2008; Hord, 2004; Louis, Kruse, & Bryk, 1995; Stoll, et al., 2006).

This article focuses on how ARPEA Executive Board members applied common features of PLCs. First is a brief review of the literature, followed by a statement of the problem, methods used to address the problem, the support structure to sustain ARPEAs commitment, the results, conclusions, and implications of ARPEA's efforts to function as a PLC.

Review of the Literature

In the face of compelling evidence of collaboration and distributive leadership best practices in the PK-12 educational setting (Elmore, 2000; Marks, & Printy, 2003; Spillane & Diamond, 2007), these concepts have not carried over to higher education practices in a robust way. A review of the literature on universities' collaboration efforts are mostly focused on partnerships with P-12 schools or with community organizations (Fullerton, 2015; Grunwell & Ha, 2014; Hopson, Miller, & Lovelace, 2016; Lewis, Kusmaul, Elze, & Butler, 2016). Many higher education professors work in isolation from one another, oftentimes within an institution but most commonly among other state-level higher education institutions. Horn (2001) observes isolationist behaviors often result in "regulatory agencies mak[ing] the basic policy decisions and the educational preparation programs must react to them" (p. 2). Not only are universities operating in isolation from one another, many are not collaborating as a collective unit with professional associations at a state level.

Young, Petersen, and Short (2002) identified factors impeding collaborative practices among institutions. One such factor noted is preparation programs in a state may be competing with one another to attract potential candidates from a small pool, which may result in "little or no room for collaboration and no sense of collective responsibility" (Young, et al., p. 147). Furthermore, Young, et al., (2002) goes on to call for universities to emulate leagues where...

...individual faculty members, departments of educational leadership, academic organizations, professional organizations, and field-based administrators concerned with the development of educational leaders must recognize their collective responsibility for forming an association or alliance with the goal of preparing competent, compassionate, and pedagogically oriented leaders. (p. 158)

The dilemma of isolation among higher education's professors in preparation programs can be countered with their commitment to developing collaborative relationships among state institutions and associations. The conceptual framework for creating opportunities for collaboration and community development among professors of educational leadership in the state of Arkansas reflects the theoretical concepts of DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker's (2008) notion of professional learning communities. DuFour's (2004) notion of PLCs describes various groupings of individuals who have a stake in education. Although DuFour's concept clearly has PK-12 educators in mind, the author's ideas are transferrable to professors in higher education forming PLCs, as well. DuFour (2004) articulated three main ideas of a PLC: a) ensuring that students learn, b) a culture of collaboration, and c) a focus on results. Professors of educational leadership programs typically have student learning at the forefront of their efforts. Therefore, adopting the PLC mindset to focus on a culture of collaboration at the higher education level is necessary to advance the practices and policies in pre-service educational leadership programs (Horn, 2001; Young, et al., 2002). It becomes incumbent upon professors in educational leadership programs to develop a collective advocacy to support pre-service leadership students

and practitioners and to help shape policies and practices for the best learning and professional opportunities.

With the rapid advancement of technological tools, multiple mechanisms are now available to remove many of the barriers hindering the work of a PLC, particularly when members of the learning community reside in multiple locations across the state. According to Dixon (2011), “[S]ocial [networking] is the use of web-based technologies to turn communication into interactive dialogue. A key component of social [networking] is the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (p.4). Vital to the work of a PLC is reliance on dependable mechanisms and support structures to develop its organizational intelligence, to engage in problem-solving, and to support knowledge management (Perkins, 2003; Stoll, et al., 2006). With today’s technological advancements, there are multiple social networking tools available to sustain a PLC’s collaborative efforts.

The rest of this article provides a picture of the problems ARPEA encountered and the steps the professors took to overcome the following challenges: staying connected, sharing information in a timely manner, and developing a unified voice on state-wide issues impacting leadership preparation programs.

Statement of the Problem

The ARPEA Executive Board members found it difficult to communicate effectively with one another when working with the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) and other state entities. Sharing a voice at state level organizations was not always representative of all higher education leadership programs in the state. Some professors served on statewide committees in which vital issues were being decided that would have a tremendous effect upon both university students and educational leadership programs. Oftentimes, communication was not shared in a timely manner among all the state’s institutions. Furthermore, there were times when some of the universities were not represented during important state-wide discussions. With the demands from national and state entities on higher education to prepare leaders to meet the needs of PK-12 schools, it became increasingly evident that a single individual or institution cannot, nor should not, influence statewide policy development.

Geographic restraints, time limitations, and lack of funding for travel to planned meetings made it difficult for the state’s leadership professors to develop its unified voice. The result of these barriers was a decrease in the professors’ ability to give timely responses to policy and rule-making bodies. In many instances, there was no collective advocating for the leadership programs and students. The barriers became fully realized during fall, 2011, when ADE requested the nine universities to collaborate on a statewide initiative to identify and align each university’s courses in their licensing-only programs of studies for students who held a master’s degree and wished to add an administrative license to their teaching certificate. ARPEA was given the charge to identify and organize each university’s course work, align those to the ISLLC (2008) standards, and attempt to make the programs of study close to the same number of credit hours. This effort was intended to allow students to begin and complete a program of study at any university and not lose hours if they had to transfer to another university within the state. After much time spent on trying to find a mutual date, time, and place for ARPEA Executive Board members to complete the work, it became quite clear physically meeting was not feasible if all nine universities were to be represented to accomplish the charge given to them.

From that point on, Arkansas professors from the nine higher education institutions with school, district, and central office leadership programs, made a renewed commitment to develop its collaborative and collective advocacy for “the improvement of education in Arkansas, the region, and the nation” (ARPEA Constitution and Bylaws, n.d., para.2). To accomplish this aim, ARPEA’s Executive Board members began to rethink how to conduct their work and renewed commitment.

Methods to Address the Problem

Collaboration is one of the core beliefs of ARPEA’s constitution; it states, “The faculty in member institutions will provide improved programs of study through the collaboration with the ARPEA membership” (ARPEA Constitution and Bylaws, n.d., para. 2). This organization is also committed to collaboration with appropriate professional organizations and agencies that include Arkansas Department of Education, Arkansas Association of Education Administrators, and the Arkansas Leadership Academy. ARPEA members have found this to be especially necessary when the state adopted recent initiatives such as new teaching standards, common assessments, and state-wide teacher, principal, and superintendent evaluation systems.

One key support structure for ARPEA board members to successfully function as a PLC depended on utilizing an online learning environment. Researchers of online environments and PLCs have stressed the strong connection between the theory of situated learning in communities of practice and developing online learning environments to support the social processes needed for collective learning among adults (Collis & Margaryan, 2004; Henri & Pudelko, 2003; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Drawing from the ideals embedded in professional learning communities and social networking, the ARPEA board members began offering ideas and access to resources that could be used to accomplish its commitment to become a professional learning community. Capitalizing on social networking tools, the following systems facilitated board members’ work: Google Docs (a space for sharing group work on projects), ooVoo (an online synchronous meeting space), Doodle (a tool for scheduling meetings), and the ARPEA web site (a repository for meeting minutes, by-laws, and membership information). These tools saved time, improved communication, and facilitated the board’s productivity. As a result, ARPEA members were able to meet regularly to discuss state-wide issues and initiatives. Additionally, the board began to invite individuals from Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) to the universities closest to Little Rock to attend ooVoo meetings for information sharing. When ARPEA began to include ADE representatives in meetings, a stronger presence and collaborative relationship with ADE emerged. Employing Dixon’s (2011) concepts of social networking, adopting DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker’s (2008) notions of PLCs, and practicing Perkins’ (2003) characteristics of organizational intelligence, problem-solving, and knowledge management moved ARPEA board members closer to applying Lave and Wenger’s (1991) theories of situated learning in communities of practice.

ooVoo as a Collaboration Tool

ARPEA held its first ooVoo meeting in January of 2012. One university has a professional ooVoo account that allows for desktop sharing for up to 12 individuals. The remaining universities participate at no cost. ooVoo is a video chat and instant messaging client developed by ooVoo LLC for Microsoft Windows, Windows Phone, Mac OS X, Android and iOS. It is

similar in some respects to Microsoft's Skype. ooVoo allows registered users to communicate through free instant messaging, with high quality video and audio calls with up to twelve locations with real-time high resolution video and desktop sharing, and PC- or Mac-to-phone calls to landlines and mobile phones for a fee. In this venue, minutes, agendas, and other documents can be viewed during discussions. The majority of meetings are held utilizing this format allowing ARPEA members to promptly respond to current issues and changes.

Doodle Scheduler

The board members spent long discussions and multiple email communications on just deciding meeting dates the majority of members could agree upon. With busy schedules and nine universities, it is difficult to find common times to collaborate. Doodle scheduler is a free tool that is extremely simple to use. After everyone responds, it is a much more efficient way to determine the best date for any event among a group of people. This tool can be found at <http://doodle.com/>

Google Docs

The professors used Google Docs to review and edit many different documents. For example, Google Docs has been a platform utilized by all nine universities for creating the final document for the work previously shared concerning the common programs of study for educational leadership among the state's universities. Each Executive board member worked from their institutions where they could collaborate with their own faculty before entering their university's program of study aligned with the appropriate ISLLC 2008 standard. Work was done individually by each university's faculty and then meetings were held through ooVoo in which the documents were viewed and discussed as a group. Google Docs can be effectively used by all members with a gmail account. Documents can be shared with anyone who has a gmail account and can be edited by all parties.

ARPEA Web Page

ARPEA's web page is located on the website of the University of Arkansas, Department of Educational Leadership. It can be found at <http://arpea.uark.edu/> This web page serves as a historical perspective of events that the organization has undertaken, as well as a listing of the current Executive Board and its membership. The by-laws of the organization and minutes of all meetings can be found at this site.

These tools have significantly changed the way ARPEA approaches issues and deals with problems. Through the use of these tools ARPEA has experienced a shift in the influence on issues that affect university leadership programs. ARPEA has developed a unified presence with a common language as an organization.

Results

When ARPEA Executive Board members began using social networking tools, it resulted in its ability to set up meeting times more easily and to meet more regularly, even on short notice as necessary. One benefit of using the ooVoo system is it eliminates travel, lodging, and meal

expenses that were once incurred to attend meetings at least two to three times in an academic year. The tools enabled the board members to collaborate more often, more freely, and to move more quickly on potential legislation or state department actions that had an impact on the state's leadership programs.

Approximately two years ago, several changes to administrator licensing were passed by the legislature. The ARPEA Executive Board requested a meeting with personnel in the Arkansas Department of Education's (ADE) licensing division to meet and discuss the interpretations of the legislative changes. The Department of Education's personnel traveled to a nearby university and participated in an ooVoo meeting, which allowed the ARPEA board members to voice their concerns and to hear ADE's message simultaneously as opposed to getting the information second-hand or one institution at a time. This invitation led to several other collaborative opportunities for shaping and clarifying changes to licensure at that time and this relationship with ADE continues.

An executive board member represents the collective voice of ARPEA on the Professional Licensure Standards Board, an advisory committee to the ADE Assistant Commissioner. Additionally, the board member also represents ARPEA on the state's sub-ethics committee. Another board member serves on Arkansas' Act 222 committee to strengthen educational leadership development in the state. This School Leadership Coordinating Council reports directly to the state's Joint Education Committee. In addition to these standing appointments, board members have also served on ad hoc committees. These included the ADE Licensure Task Force, which was convened to review and suggest changes to teacher and administrator licensing rules and regulations, and the Arkansas Association of Educational Administrator's Mentoring Program committee. Additionally, board members served on three advisory committees to define the state's licensing-only programs of study for building administrators, curriculum/program administrators, and district administrators. As previously noted, the social networking tool, Google Docs, was extensively used to coordinate the work and collective thinking toward defining the state's licensing-only programs. Other task forces in which board members served were to develop the statewide principal and superintendent evaluation systems. In all of these appointments, board members represented the collective voice of ARPEA. In our ooVoo meetings, updates are provided to the board members to discuss and to establish where ARPEA stands on issues so these may be upheld in their various appointments.

Following is one example of ARPEA exercising a unified position. Legislation was proposed that would disallow leadership candidates to complete internship in academically distressed schools. Using ooVoo for the meeting, the Executive Board developed its collective position to this piece of legislation that would limit leadership candidates' opportunity to fulfill program requirements:

Arkansas Professors of Educational Administration (ARPEA) is concerned with section 7.07.6 which states, "Field experience and internship placements for candidates in a traditional program of study for educator licensure shall not include priority schools, school districts in academic distress, or school districts under administrative takeover for violations of the Standards for Accreditation of Arkansas Public Schools and School Districts." We believe this rule will place an undue hardship on many leadership candidates in university programs throughout the state. According to Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC), Standard Element 7.2, leadership programs must require candidates engage in the following: "Sustained Internship Experience:

Candidates are provided a six-month, concentrated (9–12 hours per week) internship that includes field experiences within a school-based environment.” Because our candidates are most commonly classroom teachers, administrators, or other school personnel working full-time in their classrooms/school settings, it is possible they could be working in a school/district as described in the rules. If this is the case, it is highly unlikely a leadership candidate will be able to leave their schools during the day or week to seek internship experiences in non-priority/non-distressed/non-taken-over schools, particularly in rural and/or isolated areas throughout the state. We argue that leadership candidates are receiving standards-based knowledge, dispositions, and skills and bring these best practices to bear in their school settings while engaging in their internship experiences and field-based learning projects under the supervision of a university. We ask this rule be revised to allow leadership candidates to complete their field/internship experiences in the school district in which they work, and where they have an opportunity to make improvements through their work as interns.

This statement was uploaded onto the public comment web page for this piece of legislation to register ARPEA’s collective voice in dissent to this rule. While ARPEA did not succeed in fully turning this piece of legislation around to what was preferred, ARPEA did win one concession in that language was included to allow for waivers based on hardship cases.

Other ways access to social networking tools facilitated ARPEA’s mission as a professional learning community is in planning for ARPEA’s annual conference. Because of the collaborative efforts with ADE, the Executive Board has built relationships with licensure and other support divisions and these relationships have benefited ARPEA members. In recent years, the state adopted the Teacher Excellence Support System (TESS), a teacher evaluation process based on Charlotte Danielson’s (2007) work. In 2012, all K-12 educators in the state were in the process of receiving training on TESS. Executive Board members of ARPEA approached the state department with the proposition of providing professors of educational leadership programs similar training during its 2012 conference. Their argument rested on the need for each institution’s curriculum to be aligned with state expectations. As a result, the state department provided all materials and the services of one of their two statewide trainers to provide training to ARPEA members. The following year, the state provided materials and services of one of the two trainers for the newly adopted principal’s evaluation system (of which ARPEA had a voice in creating). As a result of these collaborative efforts, all leadership programs are now equipped to prepare its candidates to implement the state’s evaluation systems. Work in this area continues with ARPEA’s input on the state’s current work with the superintendent evaluation system.

In addition to the standing and ad hoc committee work and the continuous learning opportunities through its annual conferences, ARPEA continues to collaborate and address pressing issues related to leadership and preparation programs throughout the state. No matter where the work takes them, ARPEA has established a statewide professional learning community and collective voice built on a common purpose, trust, and mutual respect (Bryk, & Schneider, 2003; Lave & Wenger, 1991) to advocate for practices and policies that advance leadership preparation efforts in Arkansas.

Conclusions and Implications

In early 2000, Arkansas professors from nine institutions established ARPEA to serve as representation for the profession of preparing educational administration in the state. Trust is a key element to building a collaborative culture. Over the past decade and a half, ARPEA's commitment to establish a professional learning community has made manifest a trust relationship among its members. Bryk and Schneider (2003) avow that in organizations characterized by high relational trust, members were more likely to work together to advance improvements. The evolution of ARPEA to where it currently stands has not been without its struggles over the years. There have been times when members have had disagreements. Individually, members may not always agree with one another philosophically, or on specific practices or particular policies, and oftentimes may find themselves competing for students from the same pool of potential candidates. However, where trust exists, members are more inclined to stay engaged with one another and work through differences. According to Carmeli and Schaubroeck (2006), trust contributes to innovative behaviors enhancing the sharing of information more freely and making decisions together. As trust is reinforced, participants are more likely to debate the issues and resolve conflict more effectively. Through it all, ARPEA members have made a strong commitment to put individual differences aside and agree to come together as a unified voice at the state level to collectively influence legislation and to provide advocacy on state rules and regulations impacting the state's leadership preparation programs.

Implications for university leadership programs already organized as state affiliates of NCPEA, or those who are considering becoming an affiliated state, are to intentionally work toward developing a strong, unified voice to advocate for leadership students and programs in respective states. In many states, public confidence in traditional, university-based leadership preparation programs is waning, and alternative preparation programs are being promoted. When professors of leadership programs are fragmented or remain isolated from one another, their sphere of influence is limited to representing and advocating for a single university's interests.

In efforts to organize into a PLC, it is suggested state affiliates formalize procedures with a constitution, bylaws, mission, beliefs, etc. (Feger & Arruda, 2006; Stoll, et al., 2008) to provide structure for its organizational efforts. Utilizing social networking tools facilitates communication and productivity. However important these processes, a strong commitment to organizing and developing a unified voice to advocate for what is in the best interest of students in leadership preparation programs is a key ingredient. As with any professional learning community, it may become necessary to set aside personal philosophical differences in collective efforts to unify on issues for the greater good of leadership programs in the state.

This discussion concludes with 2015 NCPEA President, Dr. Carleton Holt's advice in his blog reviewing NCPEA's state affiliates. He states: "If this review of NCPEA's State Affiliate information appears to be of value to circumstances occurring in your location, please consider talking with other institutions in your state, taking a look at the Arkansas Professors of Educational Administration's website, and start a joint effort to meet the challenges facing Educational Leadership Programs of Study" (2014, ¶13).

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