

## **EDITORIAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES**

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The present society is a learning society. The International Commission on Education for the Twenty First Century stated that “Everyone may learn in a variety of educational situations and, ideally, become alternately learner and teacher in the learning society. With the integration of the non- formal in the formal, education is embedded in society, which is wholly responsible for it and renewed through it.”(Delors 1996, p. 109). ILO (2000) stated the importance of lifelong learning in the following manner.

“Given the multiple roles traditionally ascribed to education and training, as well as the emphasis on constant change in our modern societies – whether of a political, economic, environmental, technological or social nature – there is every indication that learning needs to become a lifelong function. If knowledge, skills and learning abilities are not renewed, the capacity of individuals – and by extension, of communities or nations – to adapt to a new environment will be considerably reduced, if not cut off entirely. Lifelong learning is a survival issue. The importance for persons to continue learning throughout their active working life, and even beyond, will increasingly move to the top of individual, national and international agendas in the future.”

Learning community concept is very old. This was also found in ancient education systems in India. The gurukulas and forest schools were learning communities. In high quality institutions, not only the students, but also the teachers working with the students continue to learn. About a century ago, Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore while giving stress on the necessity for continuous learning by teachers had said that

“A teacher can never truly teach unless he is still learning himself.  
A lamp can never light another lamp unless it continues to burn its

own flame. The teacher who has come to the end of his subject, who has no living traffic with his knowledge, but merely repeats his lessons to his students, can only load their minds; he cannot quicken them”(Tagore 1996, p. 64).

World Bank (2003, pp.xx) referring to the necessity of a different role for teachers and trainers stated that

“Teachers need to learn new skills and become lifelong learners themselves to keep up to date with new knowledge, pedagogical ideas, and technology. As learning becomes more collaborative, so too must teachers’ professional development, which needs to promote professional networks and learning organizations within schools and institutions.”

Learning community concept generally covers teachers and students. In wider context, it covers parents and community members. The process of learning becomes faster when all individuals in a community consciously make efforts to learn. Societies, groups, institutions and families are communities. The process of learning of the individuals is accelerated, when each of these communities provides organisational support for continuous learning.

Learning community concept does not have rigid boundaries and literature has been using the term variously, and without explicit definition (Kilpatrick, Barret & Jones 2003). It gives stress on individuals learning as a group and also gives stress on shared learning, networked learning and learning through discourses. Concepts like further education, adult education, community education and non-formal education base on learning community approach and work for its furtherance. Effective learning community strategies ensure that the individual pace of learning does not get obstructed by the community’s pace of learning. These foster the concept of personalising teaching and learning. Effective institutions are small, well focused learning communities. These operate as learning organisations focused on how people learn.

Recent stress on the ‘Knowledge Society’ has made nations “to review

and reorganise their capacities for accessing and benefiting from the high-level knowledge which shapes social change” (Keamy 2009, P.8). Since last three decades, learning community concept has been getting importance in the developed countries, due to increased acceptance of the theory of social constructivism of Vygotsky (1978). Institutions have been making effort to attract public by branding their institutions as learning communities, where each individual gets facilities for growth.

Since last two decades, the term ‘Professional Learning Communities’ is being used extensively, taking cue from the writings of Senge (1990), wherein strategies suggested for improving quality of organisations included team learning that starts with “dialogue”, that makes the team members suspend assumptions and enter into a genuine “thinking together.” Learning community concept encourages action research by all the members of the team: teachers, students, parents and educational managers. This approach entails individuals work in groups to resolve certain issues or explore new phenomena. Professional learning community enables learners and teachers explore collectively as a team. Learning community approach has been changing the role of the teacher from the role of the transmitter of the knowledge to the role of the co-learner. Bolam, McMahon, Stoll, Thomas, Wallace, Greenwood, Hawkey, Ingram, Atkinson, & Smith (2005, pp. 134-144) reported 8 characteristics of professional learning communities which were: 1. Shared values and vision, 2. Collective responsibility for pupils’ learning, 3. Collaboration focused on learning, 4. Professional learning: individual and collective, 5. Reflective professional enquiry, 6. Openness, networks and partnerships, 7. Inclusive membership, 8. Mutual trust, respect and support They also mentioned four processes, which were: 1. Optimising resources and structures, 2. Promoting individual and collective professional learning, 3. Evaluating and sustaining a PLC and 4. Leading and managing the Effective PLC. OECD(2013a) reported that low rates of collaborative and collaborative teaching practice were found in the countries participated in Teaching and

Learning International Survey (TALIS) 2008. It pointed out the importance of professional development of teachers in building and improving professional learning communities in schools. The activities covered under the Professional Learning Community Scale used in the survey were: 1. Participation in faculty meetings to discuss the school's vision and mission; 2. Use of a common standard in evaluating and assessing the progress of the learners; 3. Participation in professional learning activities such as team supervision; 4. Observing classes of peers and providing feedback; 5. Exchanging teaching materials with peers; and 6. Team teaching.

To-day, effective institutions, prefer group and collaborative learning, instead of individual centered learning. Internet resource based strategies such as learning portfolios; mobile teaching and learning technologies, shared online video, social networks, videoconferencing, virtual reality learning environments, Electronic Performance Support Systems (EPSS), web 2.0 technologies (podcasting, wikis, blogs, etc.) have recently facilitated growth of virtual and networked learning communities, overcoming geographical barriers. Learning community strategies help to increase the quality of learning, as these utilise open education resources such as free and open source software, online language learning, open access publishing, open courses, open learning, and open educational resources, open education copyright and other legal issues, open educational projects, partnerships, and consortia and open teaching. These make institution and the community come closer and ultimately accelerates the transformation of the community. "Transforming schools into 21<sup>st</sup> century learning communities means recognizing that teachers must become members of a growing network of shared expertise" (Fulton, Yoon & Lee 2005, p.1). Learning community approach has been improving the quality of teacher learning by utilising strategies such as contextualized innovation (accessibility, scalability, usability and sustainability), quality assurance and accreditation mechanisms, authentic, contextualized, and real-world learning, case, scenario, problem, project-based learning,

collaborative learning, blended learning mobile and ubiquitous learning, communities of practice, game-based learning, self-directed learning, on-demand and just-in-time learning, participatory mode of learning and media, personalised learning environments and participatory/contributory communities and influences the concerns of global education reform such as governance, finance, teacher and curriculum. This has given rise to new model of continued professional development of teachers. EC (2006, p.4) in supporting the usefulness of teacher learning from peers stated that:

*“peer support* activities such as coaching and mentoring are particularly effective methods of helping teachers to develop; e.g. new school leaders can be assigned an experienced head teacher to provide guidance, and trainee teachers and newly qualified teachers can work with experienced subject-based mentors.”

Wehling (2007, p.54) mentioned about Teachers Learning in Networked Communities (TLINC) programme that “contributes to the reinvention of teacher preparation by supporting a professional learning community that blends face-to-face mentoring with online coaching and collaboration to improve teaching quality and student achievement.” Black, Neel, & Benson (2008,p.7) reported about the induction project in Georgia, USA which had “Cross Career Learning Communities (CCLCs) composed of GSU student teachers, GSU new teachers, experienced teachers and GSU university faculty.” Effects of learning community strategies vary from one situation to another. In a study conducted on six community colleges in USA, Visher, Schneider, Wathington & Collado (2010, p. iii) reported that “Student cohorts led to strong relationships among students, creating both personal and academic support networks. Weissman, Butcher, Schneider, Teres, Collado, Greenberg & Welbeck (2011, p.111) during an evaluation of learning communities in two community colleges in USA reported about short term improvements, but stated that these improvements “are not enough to ensure that learning communities’ impacts will persist and lead to longer-term success”. OECD (2012, p. 34) suggested strategies for making institutions become learning organisations in the following words

“\*Deepen capacity to diagnose teaching and learning situations, anticipate challenges (e.g. through institutional research), pinpoint the institution’s most critical issues, and identify internal and external factors conducive to, or inhibiting innovation. Undertake meta-evaluation to identify predominant and recurring issues.

\* Promote a climate of continuous reflection on the relevance and effectiveness of the educational offering and question beliefs and mindsets, values, traditions and habits underpinning educational practices.

\* Sustain collaborative learning about quality improvements of innovations, learn from failures and engage reflection on the scope and potential pitfalls of scaling-up the innovation.

\*Foster an open-oriented approach towards innovations in teaching and learning practices, by encouraging communication networks across faculty and disciplines, as well as with other institutions, partnerships and agencies, domestically and internationally.

\* Encourage the use of assessment for learning (formative assessment) as well as assessment of learning in evaluating the impact of innovative practices.

\* Ensure that administrative and technical staff are also involved in the design and implementation of innovative practices and value their perspectives on effectiveness of teaching and learning.”

Learning community concept has brought in many reforms in the field of education. It has made efficient nations increase lifelong learning opportunities for all its citizens so that the concerned nation becomes a happy and healthy nation. Whether branded as a learning community or not, every effective institution is a learning community. Application of this concept necessitates facilities for teachers to become lifelong learners. It requires appropriate changes in attitude of institutional administrators. If appropriately handled, this strategy can boost institutional development. In case of literate areas, parental involvement can even allow parents taking classes in case of regular teachers on leave. About three decades ago, during visit to a school in UK, the author found that during post lunch session, the parents

took charge of club activities and that allowed teachers time to have their meetings (Mohanty 1980). OECD (2013b, p.51) reported that in Korea, at the Miwon Elementary School, some parents of the students take after-school language classes and a few parents also attend Korean language classes for non-native speaking parents that take place on the weekends and during school vacations. In India, at the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education at Pondicherry, parents are seen attending after school hour French, English and Tamil classes. Parental involvement, especially in the areas of club activities, can be possible in low literacy areas. Such an effort may motivate illiterate parents to become literate and lifelong learner. Collaboration between teachers and parents may require teachers visiting residences of school students at intervals. Mohanty (1979) reported such visits in vogue in 'Community school' in Scotland, UK. The learning community concept can be of much help in improving the standard of the residential institutions like Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalayas, and residential schools for disadvantaged children. Initial teacher training programmes need to be modified to make their teacher trainees grow up as effective members of the learning community of teachers. The providers of initial teacher training need to "Prepare new teachers for working in learning communities by setting up field experiences for teacher candidates that involve working in teams or cohorts"(p.24). The induction programmes of the new teachers also need to take care of this vital aspect of teacher development.

### **CONCLUSION**

High quality learning communities have teachers who are skilled in transforming the classrooms and diversifying learning sites (UNESCO 2013, p. 15). In such classrooms students direct their own learning in collaboration with teachers, peers, the curriculum, learning resources and the local community. Barriers can be created by the ineffective teachers, who definitely have to work more as part of the learning community. In the days of rampant private coaching by regular teachers (Bray 2007), on extra payment, may not make adequate teacher time available for the teacher tasks demanded by the learning community concept.

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