Meaningful Learning in Professional Development: Teaching Without Telling

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The purpose of this study was to examine the pedagogy of facilitation within physical education professional development (PD). Specific research questions were: 1) What were the self-identified pedagogical strategies employed by facilitators in PD?, and 2) From the perspective of the participants, what strategies contributed to their growth as learners? Participants included fifteen PD facilitators and 88 teachers from eight selected professional learning communities in the U.S. and Europe. Data sources included interviews, artifacts, and field notes. Three participant-centered pedagogical strategies reflected facilitators’ methods and teachers’ perceptions: (a) learning as doing: providing structure without dictating, (b) learning as trying: creating and testing new ideas, and (c) learning as sharing: public presentation of work. By teaching without telling, purposeful facilitator actions contributed to the development of an environment that encouraged teachers to become active participants in the creation of knowledge and development of professional capital.

Keywords: professional development, teacher education, constructivist learning, facilitation

Educational reform and the future of physical education ultimately rely on teachers’ continued growth and development. Recently, such change has been portrayed as not just the responsibility of the individual teacher, but of collectivities of teachers, administrators, and others working together to move forward. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) contend that these collectives must seek not only to gain knowledge but also to develop, what they have coined, professional capital. They propose that by investing in and putting teachers at the forefront of change, the development of professional capital allows both teachers and schools to reach their full potential.

Composed of a combination of human, social, and decisional capital, professional capital is the asset of teachers making decisions in complex situations with collective responsibility, openness to feedback, and a willing transparency (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). The creation of professional capital involves, among other things, continuous teacher development and a coherent set of actions to help teachers

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learn and move forward (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Professional development (PD) opportunities, often in the form of professional learning communities (PLCs), are one of these essential collective acts. These PLCs have the potential to engage teachers in the development of a collective culture allowing them to learn from and with each other and to struggle with the uncertainties that accompany their roles as learners and as teachers (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2011).

Research in the past decade has gleaned a consistent set of critical variables regarding the process of PD necessary for teachers’ continued growth and learning (O’Sullivan, 2007; Spalding, Klecka, Lin, Wang, & Odell, 2011). This type of PD focuses on pulling teachers into something they find energizing while respecting their professional autonomy and having a clear, but flexible focus. Further, it functions with a sense of urgency accompanied by patience that realizes trust and relationships only develop over time (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). The ethos is of teacher capacity building where teachers view themselves as learners finding their own voice. To be effective, PD of this nature needs to be sustained over time, teacher-centered, and physically and mentally active (O’Sullivan, 2007; Parker, Patton, & Tannehill, 2012). Learning in these environments is recognized as a process where teachers not only construct knowledge through social interaction, often away from their daily workplace, but also build solid relationships based on obligation and trust (Armour & Yelling, 2007). The result is a collaborative culture of empowerment and student learning that transforms teaching (Patton & Parker, 2012).

Effective PD must also be facilitated with care. Such facilitation involves enough firmness and persistence to challenge learners, together with enough humbleness and openness to know when to pull back, allowing teachers to discover and make meaning for themselves (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). This type of facilitation acknowledges teachers’ prior knowledge and experiences by comprehending their context, hearing their voices, and identifying their assets; thus acknowledging deficiencies in a nonjudgmental manner (Deglau & O’Sullivan, 2006). The closer groups come to adhering to these notions the more potential there is for success in terms of teacher and student growth and development (Parker, et al., 2012). While there are guideposts to the conduct of effective PD, the nuances are unclear. Knowing what to do is not the same as knowing how to do it.

How to facilitate teachers who are learning for themselves, or the pedagogy of facilitation (Poekert, 2011), remains a mystery. Our fascination with the pedagogy of facilitation stemmed from work with both teachers and facilitators (Parker, Patton, Madden, & Sinclair, 2010; Parker et al., 2012; Patton & Parker, 2012). While teachers, facilitators, and colleagues alluded to practices necessary to make PD effective, no one was able to articulate the intricacies of the process. We were left wondering what actually occurred within these PD environments that allowed teachers to learn and grow as professionals. This paper attempts to begin to fill that gap.

**Purpose and Research Questions**

The overall purpose of this study was to examine the pedagogy of facilitation within physical education PD. Specifically, two research questions guided our work: 1) What were the self-identified pedagogical strategies employed by facilitators in PD?, and 2) From the perspective of the teachers, what strategies contributed to their growth as learners?
Theoretical Framework

Constructivist approaches to learning have been widely accepted by educators and researchers alike (Borko, 2004; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2011; Le Fevre & Richardson, 2002; Richardson, 1997). Effective PD built upon constructivist principles can include mentoring, coaching, participating in professional learning communities and/or communities of practice, or engaging in self-directed learning to explore new concepts and teaching strategies (Little & Curry, 2008). While multiple definitions of constructivism exist, learning from this perspective can be summarized as “an interpretive, recursive, non-linear building process by active learners interacting with their surround – the physical and social world” (Fosnot, 2005; p. 34). Ultimately, learning is viewed as an activity that learners themselves must carry out.

Three major tenets of constructivism have implications for this study (Rovegno & Dolly, 2006). First, learning is an active process where individuals are viewed as agents in their construction of knowledge and understanding through decision-making, critical thinking, and problem solving. Second, learners construct knowledge in relation to their prior knowledge and experiences. Acknowledging the role of past experiences in the learning process, constructivism suggests that to be useful knowledge must be situated in a relevant or “authentic” context. Third, knowledge is a social product and knowledge creation is a shared experience. Group settings provide experiences in which individual and social processes of knowledge construction occur concurrently and interactively (Borko, Mayfield, Marion, Flexer, & Hiebert, 1997).

While constructivism is predominantly considered a learning theory, adherence to it suggests a radically different approach to instruction. Within a constructivist framework the task of the teacher is to provide learners with opportunities and incentives to build up knowledge rather than be a dispenser of knowledge. Fosnot (2005) suggests several nondefinitive instructional practices derived from constructivist theory which are helpful in examining instruction. First, learning is not the result of development; learning is development. Second, disequilibrium is thought to facilitate learning and learner errors represent “a self regulatory process of struggling with the conflict between existing personal models of the world and discrepant new insights” (Fosnot; p. ix). Third, reflective abstraction is the driving force of learning as individuals attempt to generalize across previous experiences. Finally, dialogue within a community stimulates further thinking.

If the facilitator is considered a teacher within the context of PD, then the tenets of constructivism hold meaning. For example, the facilitator intently attends to how teachers (as learners) understand, interpret, think, and feel about the content being taught, as well as how teachers’ own conceptions may affect their interpretation of the learning environment. The facilitator must be cognizant of what teachers bring to a learning experience while providing challenging investigations in realistic and meaningful contexts (Patton, Parker, & Neutzling, 2012; Pockert, 2011). The facilitator’s role is to find ways to encourage teachers to explore their world, discover knowledge, set and solve problems, and to reflect and think critically (Brooks & Brooks, 1993). In the end, constructivist learning theory within the realm of PD emphasizes the importance of teachers actively constructing knowledge and highlights the significant role of facilitators in that task.
Methodology

Participants
Participants were PD facilitators (13 female; 2 male) and teachers (N = 88) from eight PLCs in the U.S. and Europe (see Table 1). Before data collection, a list of potential communities was created that included PLCs with long-term facilitation, clearly articulated pedagogical objectives, and documented and sustained change (in the form of peer reviewed publications and presentations) available on the achievement of those objectives. Facilitators were active university faculty in Physical Education Teacher Education who more often than not voluntarily facilitated PD. Their experience in higher education ranged from four to 33 years. Participating teachers were a diverse group representing a broad range of teaching experience (1–36 years) at the elementary and secondary physical education levels as well as one group of nonspecialist primary teachers responsible for teaching physical education. Goals of the identified PLCs varied; yet, regardless of the location or context all were teacher-originated, nonmandated groups focusing on self-generated problems. Appropriate informed consent and institutional review board procedures were followed.

Data Sources
Data sources included (a) formal and focus group interviews, (b) informal conversational interviews, (c) field notes, and (d) artifacts.

Interviews. To gain an in-depth understanding of participant views of the pedagogy of facilitation, semistructured teacher focus group interviews (range of 4–15 participants) and individual facilitator interviews were conducted (60–90 min). The semistructured nature of these interviews allowed for topical trajectories in the conversation that strayed from the interview guide when appropriate. Interview topics included participants’ views on PD facilitation, particularly the pedagogical strategies employed. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. In all a total of 397 pages of transcriptions were analyzed.

Informal Conversational Interviews. Frequent informal conversational interviews (Patton, 2002) were also conducted. An average of three hours of informal conversational interviews occurred with selected participants, most of whom were facilitators, at opportune times including professional conferences, PD sessions, and university and personal visits. As the informal interviews often occurred in nonscheduled times in convenient settings, the length and frequency of the interviews varied. The strength of the informal conversational method resides, “in opportunities it offers for flexibility, spontaneity, and responsiveness to individual differences and situational changes” (Patton, 2002; p. 342). As such, questions were personalized to deepen communication with the participant being interviewed. Brief notes were taken during these interviews, immediately after which extensive notes regarding what was discussed were recorded. Informal conversational interviews were used to corroborate and expand upon the formal interviews.

Field Notes. Descriptive field notes from observations were taken at PD sessions of seven of the eight PLCs (1–2 hr each), describing teacher and facilitator interactions. Sessions involved both active and planning activities, including curriculum
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PLC</th>
<th>Facilitators</th>
<th>Type(s) of professional development facilitated</th>
<th>PD Participants</th>
<th>Frequency/Duration</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Europe</td>
<td>Doris, Gabbie, Molly</td>
<td>Various teaching models, assessment, school physical education policy, development of regional communities of practice.</td>
<td>Secondary physical education teachers;</td>
<td>Ongoing (5+ years)</td>
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<td>2 US</td>
<td>Maggie, Ken, Carol</td>
<td>Development and dissemination district-wide elementary curriculum (component of PEP grant), various teaching models, assessment, teaching effectiveness.</td>
<td>Elementary physical education teachers;</td>
<td>Ongoing (5+ years)</td>
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<td>3 US</td>
<td>Morgan, Peter, Summer</td>
<td>Teaching models, assessment of learning, development of thinking/reflective professionals as part of a community of learners (components of two PEP grants).</td>
<td>Elementary and secondary school teachers</td>
<td>Ongoing (4+ years)</td>
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<td>4 US</td>
<td>Jean, Jesse</td>
<td>University partnership with student teaching supervisors, state content standards, various teaching models, assessment, and development of a community for helping provide PD for teachers by teachers.</td>
<td>Secondary physical education teachers</td>
<td>Ongoing (10+ years)</td>
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<td>5 US</td>
<td>Corine</td>
<td>University partnership with student teaching supervisors. State content standards, various teaching models, assessment, and advocacy.</td>
<td>Elementary physical education teachers</td>
<td>Ongoing (10+ years)</td>
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<td>6 Europe</td>
<td>Kris</td>
<td>Teaching practice and lesson ideas for primary teachers.</td>
<td>Primary classroom teachers</td>
<td>Ongoing (5+ years)</td>
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<td>7 Europe</td>
<td>Zinna</td>
<td>Ongoing professional development for university supervisors of student teachers.</td>
<td>Secondary physical education teachers</td>
<td>Ongoing (2+ years)</td>
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<td>8 Europe</td>
<td>Frances</td>
<td>Professional development for supervisors of student teachers.</td>
<td>Secondary physical education teachers</td>
<td>Ongoing (2+ years)</td>
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*Note:* Elementary and primary indicates students ages 5–10; secondary indicates students ages 11–18.
development, learning sport education, practice sessions for public presentations, supervision of student teachers, and identifying the group’s next learning needs.

Artifacts. Artifacts included website postings of the PLC’s purpose, previous PD topics and activities, and e-mail correspondence with the research team.

Data Analysis

Data analysis included both inductively derived categories formulated directly from this data set and deductive categories based on a priori constructs from relevant literature. Open, axial, and selective coding were used to interpret data in developing categories representing teachers’ and facilitators’ views of the facilitation of PD (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). During the open and axial coding phase each researcher individually read all written transcripts several times, making notations in the margins. From each transcript, significant phrases or sentences that pertained directly to the pedagogy of facilitation within physical education PD were identified. Also during the open and axial coding phase, analytic memos (Creswell, 2007) were written for each data source to document and enrich the interpretive process. Analytic memos consisted of questions, comments, and ideas about emerging categories. Next, we engaged in the process of conceptualizing and defining categories of results in terms of their properties and dimensions. To accomplish this, we brought our individual analyses together and revisited all the data to examine the pedagogy of facilitation, taking turns sharing our insights and challenging each other’s interpretations, making new interpretations where necessary.

Next, in the selective coding phase, we formed themes by relating clusters of data to each other, determining which categories were dominant. This was done by interrogating the initial data categories to determine which category encompassed the most data from the perspectives of all participants. Based on our examination of facilitator and teacher responses, data were originally organized into six categories and after further analysis and discussion collapsed into three: (a) providing structure without dictating, (b) creating and testing new ideas, and (c) public presentation. These categories were then arranged according to procedures suggested by Affara, Brown, and Mangione (2002) to delineate major and minor categories. Because the focus was on the phenomenon of the pedagogy of facilitation itself, the specific PLC characteristics (e.g., purpose, goals, location) were not taken into account in data sorting (Creswell, 2007; Rossman & Ralliss, 2004). Finally, newly created codes and categories were sorted, compared, and contrasted until saturated—that is, until analysis produced no new codes or categories and when all of the data were accounted for in the core categories. The most relevant excerpts from each of the categories obtained by inductive coding were integrated to portray facilitators’ teaching strategies and teachers’ responses. Thus, direct quotes were drawn from participants’ interviews. Teacher participants are identified by their teaching level and facilitators by pseudonym.

Trustworthiness. Trustworthiness was established utilizing several separate techniques. First, triangulation employing multiple investigators and multiple data sources was used to confirm the findings (Merriam, 2009). Data were triangulated for analytical purposes across all data sources (interviews, field notes, artifacts). Investigator triangulation occurred through the use of two investigators collecting and analyzing data. Next, a researcher journal was kept to purposefully search for
variations in participant perceptions of the facilitation process (Merriam, 2009). Finally, an audit trail in the way of a transparent description of the research steps taken from the start of a research project to the development and reporting of findings (Patton, 2002), was laid out for a colleague (third author) who was not part of the data collection. This colleague served as a peer debriefer who was able to challenge the logic behind interpretations made by the first two authors (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results

Findings report conceptions of physical education PD facilitation; specifically strategies employed by facilitators contributing to teachers’ growth as learners. Participant-centered instructional strategies are presented, describing facilitator methods and teachers’ corresponding perceptions. Three categories represent teaching strategies including immediate facilitator/teacher interactions used when the facilitator and the group were together, intermediate strategies when the facilitator and teacher group were separate, and opportunities representing the potential for long-term inquiry: (a) learning as doing: providing structure without dictating, (b) learning as trying: creating and testing new ideas, and (c) learning as sharing: public presentation of work.

Learning as Doing: Providing Structure Without Dictating

Facilitators used four immediate pedagogical strategies that provided structure without dictating. These strategies, social and active learning opportunities, monitoring discussion and interjecting at opportune times, thoughtful and critical questioning to prompt reflection, and guiding and redirecting, represent instances when the facilitators and teachers had direct interaction during PD activities.

Social and Active Learning Opportunities. Learning as a result of interactions with others in informal settings occurred when groups of teachers met and collaborated at various times throughout the school year often in nonwork related venues. Working as a group allowed teachers to actively participate in PD sessions by sharing ideas and consulting with one another on relevant issues regarding physical education. These teachers reflected on personal practices, increased their knowledge, and found solutions to difficult problems while working as collective groups. One facilitator shared the power of the social aspect when reflecting on how she went about fostering the development of relationships,

You have to create that social construct. When you want to create a relationship with someone, you need to have a context and usually it’s social. If you get to know someone outside of a professional relationship, it gives you an opportunity to get so much closer and be so much more open. People start to open up. There’s nothing like a beer and a casual environment that really gets people talking. They talk about themselves and about personal things, and that then connects you… so you create that social structure. (Jean)

Personal interaction in a social environment was a hallmark of social learning. One secondary teacher indicated that “we have to have food and wine” which subsequently allowed for casual conversation among teachers and facilitators.
Teachers acknowledged the facilitators’ role in the creation of the informal, social environment recognizing “they [the facilitators] always make sure that we’re well taken care of.”

Field notes of an elementary physical education PD session hosted by facilitators corroborated the social atmosphere described by participants,

As teachers arrive they are enthusiastically greeted with hugs and smiles by the facilitators and other teachers. Food and drinks are enjoyed while the group chats about personal and professional topics. With food in hand, they take the conversation to the den. It is the week before Christmas and the teachers and facilitators exchange small gifts and discuss holiday plans. Once the discussion begins to die down, Maggie shares the logistics of the upcoming national presentation in which the teachers and facilitators will participate. In preparation for the presentation, teachers begin assembling picture collages portraying changes they have experienced as a result of their participation in PD. Ken (another facilitator) then poses the question, “How would you describe this collage?” The teachers enthusiastically begin pointing to individual pictures of their students as they discuss how they have changed the way they view and teach social responsibility. (field notes, 12/8/10)

For teachers, the social nature of PD foreshadowed a physically active learning environment with peers, further contributing to their professional learning. The benefits of these learning sessions are described by a primary teacher,

… PE is something you have to be involved in; you have to see how it’s done to be able to teach it yourself. I couldn’t really pick up something if I read how to play a game; it wouldn’t be the same as when you are being shown by somebody else. Now I’m not going to forget the games because we demonstrated them to each other.

The physically active environment was supported by a cognitively active environment. The use of discussion among groups of teachers as a means of active learning was prevalent among facilitators as “we use always small groups to discuss; of course, it’s interactive” (Zinna). Doris further expounded on this concept commenting on the importance of teacher input,

The whole idea of learning from each other has been good. I’ve found they [teachers] are very willing to accept instruction or sharing from people who might be viewed as excellent as long as their voice is allowed to come into discussion. They don’t like to be talked at, but they like the discourse that you have between someone who is an expert in the area – ownership is key for them.

Learning together as a group allowed teachers to use their collective experiences as a means for sharing ideas to increase knowledge and skills. One secondary teacher commented, “We actually found the solutions within ourselves when we shared them.” Teachers realized they could positively impact the learning of one another while working as a group. Yet the composition of the group was critical as it needed to be “people who want to be here” (elementary teacher) as “you’re going to have to find that person who’s going to go 100% and they have to like each other” (elementary teacher).
Monitoring Discussion and Interjecting at Opportune Times. By limiting their own input, facilitators provided support by selectively supplying information to teachers allowing them to refine their thinking and lead them to one or more plausible solutions. Facilitator talk was recognized as an inhibitor to teacher discussion and facilitators consciously curtailed their own talking by knowing “when I must be silent” (Zinna) to encourage teacher voice. The role of the facilitator was deemed as a balancing act, requiring an ability to identify when to be silent and when to interject. One facilitator explained this evolving role,

That’s the key, being a facilitator. As a facilitator, the role changes because it’s like if you stand on the outside and you’re like “do I go in or do I stay out? Should I offer info and what should I offer and when should I offer it?” That’s the tricky part…knowing who to say what to. (Jean)

Regardless of the strategy used, the juxtaposition of monitoring and injecting allowed for the transformation of participant identified needs into new knowledge, skills, values, and beliefs.

The teachers involved unequivocally appreciated being heard or having a voice. Having been frequently silenced, teachers expressed that, despite having a great deal of knowledge and experience in a particular PD topic, facilitators did not present themselves as all-knowing. Instead of “telling” teachers, they provided clarifying information when needed, “It was like, yes she knew a lot more than we did, but we kind of had to pull it out of her rather than her shoving it down our throats” (elementary teacher). This process of interjecting at the opportune time that encouraged teachers to take control of the PD process is explained,

They try to do more facilitating. They never run the meeting. They don’t ever … they really let everybody generate ideas; they kind of just help to guide the group. We don’t like to do it without them because we learn from their input. We’ll drive the meeting but it’s nice to know where they sit or what their ideas and opinions are. (elementary teacher)

This strategy required someone “who’s got patience and has respect for other people’s point of view and for other people’s professions; who can sit and wait and guide them” (secondary teacher). These facilitators had the ability to provide an appropriate combination of pressure and support. As one secondary teacher explained, “They [facilitators] had enough skill and experience to be able to gently push when gentle pushing was needed and pull back when pulling back was needed”.

Thoughtful and Critical Questioning to Prompt Reflection. Facilitators frequently used questioning to prompt teachers to think about and explore problems, taking a hands-off approach. This technique pressed teachers with thoughtful questions to channel learning and encourage critical thinking.

Observational data supported the use of purposeful questioning, coupled with adequate wait time. Field notes taken during a PD session with the goal of creating a proposal for a state AAHPERD conference demonstrated facilitators’ use of questioning,

Meeting begins with Corine [facilitator] informing the group of presentation proposal deadline, which prompts informal discussion among teachers of
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possible presentation ideas. After some time, she reassures the teachers saying, “You are in the driver’s seat. Where do you see it going? What do you see as important?” During a lengthy discussion among teachers Corine says nothing; she simply sits and listens. Teachers ultimately decide on the topic of assessment, but seem to be unfocused. Corine prompts more discussion and clarity with the question “What is the most difficult thing to assess? What would you want other teachers to know?” (fieldnotes, 3/2/11)

Facilitator questioning was a pedagogical strategy recognized by teachers, “They did it without saying, without being anal and sequential. They did it more by guiding and searching and asking, an inquisitive approach, like an educator” (elementary teacher). This use of facilitator questioning was deemed as a way to help teachers confront new ideas,

To transform their knowledge, capacities, and skills to what happens in practice, they [teachers] need to confront all they do, with documental knowledge, theoretical knowledge, with other kinds of knowledge. When they confront this, something new happens. They understand, that’s how this works. Why this works. Where this works. Where this does not work. (Zinna)

While a valuable teaching tool, participants acknowledged that questioning had to be done in a way that challenged teachers’ thinking in a nonthreatening manner. From a teacher perspective this was reflected by “she never belittled … never said it was wrong…never criticized”, but instead “she reflected on what we’d said and she said ‘so this is what you mean?’ and then we heard what we said” (elementary teacher). Facilitators described this as,

In our conversations I would try to challenge teachers on why they were selecting what they were selecting or just casually say “how would the students respond to that?” I asked questions that didn’t make them question themselves in terms of a negative way, but question what they did or what they chose and its impact on kids. (Doris)

Teachers at times, however, did want easy answers and wished facilitators, instead of being noncommittal, would simply provide solutions to their problems. Yet, it was the use of questioning which prompted critical thinking and reflection. One secondary teacher explained,

Whenever I asked for suggestions … I always wished, “like just give me the answer. Just tell me what to do”. [But] they never just give you the answer. They always make you think and question, so you are critically thinking.

**Guiding and Redirecting.** An initial facilitator role described by all participants was that of a guide. In the words of one primary teacher, “They kind of guide, not always giving their ideas and not accepting ideas, but they’re kind of guiding”. In this guiding role the PD process was facilitated, not dictated, by providing a framework for teachers to identify and develop their own ideas. A facilitator acknowledged that,

You have to pull them in and get them to recognize, if possible, something that they have in common that they want to work on. You have to keep pulling
from them what their needs are and try to get them to answer their needs. Yet, you have to throw things in and get them to bite. (Doris)

While a less formal teaching technique, facilitators frequently channeled discussion to help teachers focus their thinking. When necessary facilitators “had to be strong in redirection” (elementary teacher) by revisiting PD goals, emphasizing essential information, and refocusing their efforts. One secondary teacher, acknowledged the importance of this guidance, stating that facilitators tactfully redirected discussion to refocus the group’s efforts,

There were themes and some ideas to develop. We were free to discuss, although we had facilitators to put some order into the discussion because sometimes we were out here [off task]. They helped to focus on what was essential to discuss.

While teachers appreciated the guidance, they also valued their independence. One elementary teacher shared, “There was some structure, but they let us hammer that out. We decided how we wanted to do it”. This combination of guidance and redirecting created an environment that fostered autonomy as one elementary teacher explained,

It was like giving us permission to do our thing; maybe not do it exactly as they [facilitators] might have done it, but we knew they were still there in very close proximity for that guidance if we needed it. Yet, at the same time they weren’t right in there with us … they were letting us off lead, like dog training, but still in range of the shaker can.

The guiding and redirecting process was, however, an incremental and “developmental kind of process” (Jean). It was best represented as a gradual shift of responsibility for PD activities to teachers. Jean shared her strategy,

Early on, you’re always working with them. You might take the lead on something, but you’re still working with them. Then giving them, encouraging them to do a little bit more, and then removing yourself; still being available to provide support or answer questions. So it is kind of evolving.

Learning as Trying: Creating and Testing New Ideas

Teachers and facilitators revealed a sense of incompleteness at the end of direct interactive sessions. For example, facilitators felt that within traditional PD, teachers “were considered to be teachers and implementers but not necessarily viewed as learners who needed to learn collaboratively so you have a complete disjuncture” (Kris). Similarly, teachers felt they needed guidance and experience as well as “assistance when they went back to implement new ideas” (secondary teacher). To reinforce continual learning between PLC meetings, two intermediate learning strategies were employed when the facilitator and group were separate. These strategies were designed to extend teachers’ professional learning and engagement by trying out new ideas and critically discussing outcomes.

**Just Try it Out.** This initial strategy used by facilitators was designed to encourage teachers to remember and use ideas and strategies from workshops and group
meetings in their respective schools. In attempt to evoke the use of newly experienced ideas, facilitators often tried to, “leave a piece of something for them to do” (Jean). Teachers agreed this strategy helped them to test the worth of new ideas by implementing them into their own practice, “you get the in-service and then you go in and try it. Unless you put it into practice you forget” (secondary teacher). Facilitators also recognized the importance of teachers having the opportunity to apply what they had learned:

Its about them applying it; they have to apply it. So working with them closely, its one thing if I can give them any form of education, but for them to actually try it on their own and go and implement it into their own teaching. And a lot of times they need to see it. They need to see and example of it, “ok let me think about it and go do it myself.” (Jesse)

As a support mechanism, facilitators were often able to observe and offer guidance to teachers as they explored unfamiliar teaching strategies and new curriculum. One facilitator commented on the importance of creating an atmosphere where teachers felt supported,

It was about giving new ideas and trying it out, in suspending belief if you like. All I asked for them to do was to be willing to try some stuff … I also asked them to be willing to talk to each other, and allow us to come in and see what it is that they’re doing; those were the fundamental things. (Morgan)

Teachers likewise appreciated facilitators’ willingness to provide assistance in their classes. This assistance provided teachers with a bit more security and confidence in their implementation of new ideas. As one secondary teacher said,

He [facilitator] did soccer. I was not used to teaching soccer at that time so it really gave me a comfort level seeing him do it and then going through the steps myself. He modeled lessons, so I was very comfortable watching him and then I turned around in my other classes and followed what he had modeled. (Secondary teacher)

These “try-it-out” strategies often allowed teachers in comparable teaching settings to revamp their teaching by incorporating aspects of what worked with others with similar students and schools. Most often, teachers were eager to implement changes to school curriculum. One secondary teacher offered,

I see it as “my toolkit is changing” and “I will be taking that out and I will be revamping this piece here and that piece there.” It’s going to come from in here [the PLC], because all of the brains. We are in the same situation, all working with very challenging kids with not very good facilities.

**Now What?: Critically Discussing Outcomes.** Just trying it out was not sufficient for either facilitators or teachers. After teachers had the chance to try out new ideas, assess their effects, and adjust their approaches, facilitators felt they should, look critically at their practice and teachers felt the need to “come back and say ‘how did it work for you’ and get feedback on it” (secondary teacher). Thus, facilitators frequently organized follow-up sessions to encourage the sharing
of the outcomes of their experimentation with new ideas. To support one another, teachers brainstormed ideas to better provide instruction for all of them. As they became more aware of the challenges shared with others, they were open to gaining new insight from peers. One secondary teacher said,

I’m the only PE teacher in my school and that may make a difference. In other schools where they might have a department of four or five other teachers, they can constantly bounce things off one another. The fact that I’m on my own is one reason I’m interested in this [PLC]. I get to discuss different things that happen with different people. That is major because I have nobody else so I am working in isolation.

Ultimately the goal of the “try it out” strategies was not for teachers to simply replicate what had been discussed at meetings, but for them “to be able to do it and find that confidence that they’ll be able to perpetuate that and grow it on their own” (Jean). The intention of this strategy was to encourage teachers to take ownership of the knowledge and skills, helping them to view themselves as learners and actively construct knowledge when they were alone.

Concurrently, teachers recognized that when they “were given the opportunity and the space to put forward ideas that worked, they found solutions [to their issues] so very quickly” (secondary teacher). In the long run these intermediate strategies were about teacher learning and teachers’ constructing knowledge for themselves.

One facilitator indicated,

It’s about them constructing their own knowledge. True learning has to happen over time. It happens in small steps and with relationships. And, with people constructing their own knowledge. It keeps coming back to them – they constructed their own knowledge. (Ken)

Learning as Sharing: Public Presentation of Work

Learning and growing for these groups did not end with the interaction needed to accomplish group goals, instead facilitators encouraged teachers to engage in opportunities representing the potential for long-term professional learning. For example, Jean stated, “It was all about giving them opportunities to take them to the next level”. In an effort to enhance continued and long-term learning, groups were encouraged to publically disseminate their work with others through presentations and publications. An experienced facilitator shared,

One of the most fundamental things I found was to hold teachers accountable in a nonthreatening way to share their work. Talking about their work is enormously a confidence building thing for them and can be a huge catalyst in moving them to the next level and taking major shifts. (Morgan)

At times sharing was informal and at other times it extended to local, regional, and national presentations. For other groups it also involved publication of their work.

Informal Presentations. Sharing often began as casual, informal presentations to others interested in their work or progress. In the eyes of the facilitators, such presentations helped teachers synthesize their learning and motivated them through
realizing their accomplishments. For example, a facilitator of an ongoing project reflected about having teachers present to Ken, another of the group’s facilitators,

I was trying to see where they were by letting them see where they were; to let them conceptualize what they were doing. The more they can verbalize and talk about it, not the process, but “here’s what we’ve accomplished” then it gives them more power and it becomes theirs. It was kind of a celebration. (Maggie)

The teachers also felt that by being able to give presentations, they had learned. It allowed them to realize “how much progress we have made. It was huge and, those guys [facilitators], were really surprised at how much we had gotten done. It was great because we had something to share” (elementary teacher).

**Sharing With Other Teachers.** A second form of presentation came when teachers shared their work in the form of in-school sessions or workshops for other teachers within the district. Often this first form of presentation outside their immediate group, while accompanied by some anxiety, helped teachers to recognize the impact they could have on others. As a primary teacher indicated, “You can bring it back to your staff. Like at a staff meeting you can say, ‘I was at this course and these are a few of their ideas if you’d be interested in trying them out’”.

This sharing within schools engaged others, allowing communities to expand and grow,

The idea of community is that communities are always expanding. So the fact that I’ll go back to my staff tomorrow and can say what we learned to somebody else and maybe I can pick up somebody else to come to the meeting next time. So you are always expanding it. (primary teacher)

Planning and conducting workshops for themselves or other teachers on a more formal basis provided another presentation venue. Facilitators saw this as “a shift in capacity building, providing them with a sense of confidence and competence within their own work that would allow them to move their profession forward” (Morgan). Teachers initially reacted to these sharing opportunities with validation, as they thought facilitators were valuing their contributions. This sharing then also provided teachers with a sense of empowerment or accomplishment as they felt they had something worthwhile to offer. When sharing with other teachers an urban secondary teacher echoed,

So you kind of feel like ok, I think we’re having an impact. I can’t measure it, but we’re going away feeling maybe a little bit more empowered by PE. Confident is actually the word, more than anything, it’s just feeling a little more confident.

**Sharing With Young Teachers and Mentoring.** Sharing eventually led to moving beyond themselves to take responsibility for the future of physical education through mentoring not only young teachers, but those who were “stale and needed to be revamped” (secondary teacher). Facilitators recognized that, “if we have a significant group of teachers who care about our profession, then the new group coming up can show these teachers as models, and it can reproduce and regenerate itself” (Morgan). Likewise the teachers began to feel “that we do need to share
what we are doing and share it back with younger teachers and mentor people” (secondary teacher).

**Formal Conference Presentations.** Formal conference presentations provided a venue for teachers to showcase their work at an organized conference. Facilitators guided teachers through initial presentations by having them share lesson ideas they had observed. Like other types of presentations these opportunities provided affirmation that teachers were doing the right thing and that they could take on “a new role that is inspirational to other teachers” (Morgan).

Teachers involved in the PLCs not only felt verified that they were able to be a support to many other teachers and districts, but that it allowed them to branch out to other opportunities such as becoming clinical faculty at the local university. This sense of achievement went beyond recognition to the need to advocate for a better future for physical education. One secondary teacher indicated,

… it’s just such a sense of achievement, that this group is recognized as special because of the people who are in it. I just think we have learned so much from one another that if we could spread the word we would spread the word, you know what I mean?

**Publications.** Lastly, sharing with others for some groups was achieved through the publication of journal articles. Writing projects, while often initially intimidating for teachers, clearly resulted in learning as well displaying group trust and respect. One elementary teacher reflects after writing her section of a paper,

Okay, that was harder than I expected, I am really distracted with school work, but I gave it a shot. I wish I wouldn’t have read Taryn’s and Lisa’s (other teachers) first ‘cuz I really wanted to copy them…very good job ladies. Anyway, feel free to suggest changes, or just change it. (email, 5/8/11)

Publication not only served as a learning forum, but also validated who these teachers were as they were often alone in their schools. In fact, one facilitator commented that a transformation took place when teachers published two articles on novel teaching concepts in a national journal. She stated, “they got a really nice response from JOPERD…there’s other people listening and they’re like ‘that’s cool’” (Corine).

**Conclusion/Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to examine the pedagogy of facilitation within physical education PD. By teaching without telling, facilitators used various participant centered pedagogical strategies to make PD meaningful, contributing to the development of an environment that encouraged teachers to become active participants in the creation of knowledge. Participants’ reaction to those strategies was favorable and consistent with facilitator intent.

Teacher learning communities depicted in this study adhered to the fundamental constructs of effective PLCs. For example, they were sustained over time at a minimum of a year (O’Sullivan, 2007), social (Armour & Yelling, 2007), physically and mentally active (Patton et al., 2012), and teachers themselves determined
the content of the PD to be undertaken (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). Most importantly, however, they were facilitated with care to ensure a meaningful and supportive learning environment (Parker et al., 2012).

The pedagogical strategies used in these learning communities were carefully orchestrated with purposeful steps used by facilitators to aid teachers in becoming independent and life-long learners. Specifically, the facilitation described in this study involved a three-tiered approach to the development and use of knowledge. Immediate, “learning by doing” strategies were used when the facilitator and the group were together. When the facilitator and group were separate, a distinct intermediate “learning by trying” approach was used. Finally, to foster long-term inquiry “learning by sharing” strategies were used. Ultimately, these developmental approaches fostered independent learning and empowered teachers to make learning meaningful.

Results support the growing recognition of the importance of providing teachers with PD opportunities where learning is aligned and coherent (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999), resulting in the development of what Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) deem professional capital. It has been suggested that the new generation of teachers must be an entire community of professionals who are deeply committed to their work and highly capable of carrying it out (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012), requiring teachers to be among other things, highly motivated, continuously learning, well networked with each other to maximize their own improvement, and able to make effective judgments using all their capabilities and experience.

Professional development supporting the creation of professional capital, therefore, is focused on the use of meaningful tasks and capacity building, where teachers are viewed as learners; both individually and as part of a larger learning community. Coinciding with this recognition is the belief that the role of the teacher includes that of a learner rather than merely a technician providing knowledge (Casey, 2012). In physical education, assisting teachers to view themselves as learners has been advocated as an essential part of PD (Armour, 2010; Makopoulou & Armour, 2011), requiring teachers to conceptualize learning as an intentional, dynamic, social, and active process.

For this type of learning to occur, supportive conditions that “encourage and sustain a collegial atmosphere” must be present (Hord & Tobia, 2012; p. 26). Results of this study further support the importance of this type of environment through the development of relationships and the social nature of learning. Groups of teachers in this study with their facilitators created the necessary structural and human supportive environment that permitted intentional collective learning and the application of that learning (Hord & Tobia, 2012), thus paving the way for a transformation of teachers’ thinking.

While these structural and human supportive conditions were necessary, they were not sufficient pedagogical circumstances for learning. Instead, it was supportive conditions coupled with thoughtful facilitation that fostered that learning. This type of facilitation involved changing the way teachers viewed themselves as learners and how facilitators provided opportunities to build up knowledge rather than be a dispenser of knowledge. The purposeful facilitation was an additional element that led to the groups’ changes in learning.

Adhering to a constructivist perspective and Fosnot’s (2005) assertion that disequilibrium facilitates learning, facilitators in this study successfully challenged
teachers’ thinking by providing structure to PD activities without dictating. When appropriate, they successfully introduced disequilibrium all the while creating an environment in which teachers felt safe, supported, and able to make mistakes without judgment. Also consistent with constructivist theory, facilitators strongly believed in the social nature of learning, supporting Fosnot’s (2005) assertion that dialogue within a community engenders further thinking. For example, facilitators emphasized the social nature of learning, encouraging discourse and group reflection. An extended form of dialog, public presentation, was a strategy that was positively received by the teachers involved. This formal and informal sharing affirmed teachers’ efforts, highlighting their learning and advocating for their profession.

In the end, teachers’ and facilitators’ views of the pedagogy of facilitation within physical education PD were remarkably similar. Though not a primary focus of this investigation, the analogous responses from all PLCs suggest that there is little variation within context and level of teaching. Lieberman and Miller (2008) indicate that PLCs provide a context where, through community interaction, new ideas and strategies develop and teacher competence is cultivated. A number of scholars have proposed that learning communities challenge what we have come to know about teacher PD, implement PD in innovative and shared ways, and place teachers at the forefront of their own growth (Lieberman & Miller, 2008; Little & Curry, 2008). Perhaps more important to the participants in this study than location, was that PD was effectively structured and facilitated, breaking the traditional mold of PD available to teachers that has been “both inadequate and irrelevant” (Nieto, 2009, p. 10). Instead, successful facilitation involved designing PD that was both meaningful and informed by theories of teacher learning.

Physical education professional development is at a crossroads. The question becomes—knowing what we now know about effective PD and its facilitation though PLCs, what do we do? The time, effort, commitment, and passion of these collectivities of teachers and facilitators cannot be ignored. Teacher learning results from engagement in PD designed over extended periods of time and guided by teachers, based on what teachers know and have experienced with what they can still learn to improve their lives as teachers and their practices in the classroom. Most importantly, learning must be made meaningful to them. If, however, the pedagogy of facilitation within PD lacks the intensity and rigor that comes with intentional instruction and purposeful environmental design, and is instead prepackaged for efficient delivery of noncontextualized content, then learning potential is compromised. While traditional one-shot PD may convey information, it is highly unlikely to help teachers become learners and thinkers or develop the professional capital necessary to transform physical education in schools.

References


