PROFOUND IMPROVEMENT

## BUILDING CAPACITY FOR A LEARNING COMMUNITY

CORAL MITCHELL & LARRY SACKNEY

Coral Mitchell

Mitchell is a Professor at Brock University in the Education Program. Her contributions to the area of Educational Administration have been immense and as such she was awarded 2017 Distinguished Service Award from the Canadian Association for the Study of Educational Administration.

Larry Sackney

Prior to his passing in 2011, Sackney was an Emeritus Professor of Educational Administration in the College of Education at the University of Saskatchewan. In 2002, Dr. Sackney received the Distinguished Service Award from the Canadian Society for the Study of Educational Administration, and in 2004, he was awarded his university's third Distinguished Research Supervisor Award. In 2012, he was awarded a Life Membership by the International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement in Malmo, Sweden.
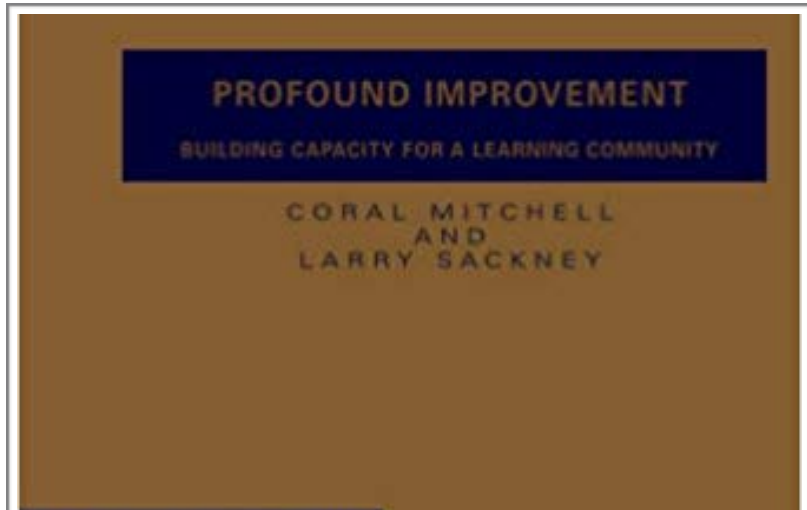
This book explores how building capacity in the domains of personal, interpersonal and organization will lead to a profound improvement in teaching and learning and professional development. The book challenges the current education structure that is mechanistic in nature and that is not supportive of members of the education community coming together with a shared vision.

The authors provide framework of how to build capacity with in each of three domains focusing on individual and group engagement to build organizational practices and routines that build upon the strengths and leadership of those in the learning community.

A LEARNING COMMUNITY CONTEXTUAL ELEMENTS

Mitchell and Sackney highlighted three pivotal dimensions of a learning community that take into account the complex dynamics of the individuals within in it. Their position is that when capacity is built within these dimensions it promotes and enhances professional learning and leadership.

Personal Capacity
Has to do with the active and reflective construction of knowledge. Building capacity in this domain challenges values, assumptions, belief systems and practices.

Interpersonal Capacity
This domain is concerned with building a collective meaning for the individuals within the learning community. Capacity building in this area is about bringing people together for a shared purpose.

Organizational Capacity
This domain is concerned with building structures that create and maintain sustainable organizational processes. Capacity building concerns itself with building flexible systems that support new and old ideas.

PERSONAL CAPACITY

THE SEARCH FOR KNOWLEDGE

Image source: https://blog.nauticindex.com/accuracy-basic-nautic-tools/

Internal Search

Mitchell and Sackney highlight that building personal capacity starts with the pursuit of personal knowledge.

Educators need to ensure that their espoused theory and theory of use are aligned (p. 18). When they are not, one's professional practice will lack integrity and congruence.

To help one "walk the talk", the authors suggest using personal reflective practices such as descriptive journaling to avoid discrepancies in ones intention and effect.

External Search

Through the use of Network Theory we can see that thoughts and behaviours are partially dependant on the ties individuals establish with other people in their social and professional circles (p.23).

Both strong and weak ties are important as the latter provides psychological stability while the latter opens the door to learn about new ideas and encourage diversity.

In order to build personal capacity there should be a balance between the two.

The Searches in Mutual Relationships

The authors note that the internal and external searches should be in constant dialogue with each other (p.27).

When either of these searches are isolated it will limit the amount of personal growth an individual will have.

Portraiture, peer coaching relationships and personal growth plans are some effective strategies to promote balance and growth in the relationship between the internal and external searches.

CONSTRUCTING PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE

Building personal capacity entails deconstruction (analysis and reflection) as well as reconstruction (action) (p.31).

Image source: https://mobilebusinessinsights.com/2017/09/the-essential-building-blocks-of-an-iot-

Process of Knowledge Construction

A constructive view of learning would suggest that it is a process of active construction and that process results in a qualitative change in understanding. Within the learning environment, knowledge construction is product of both context and activity.

From an organizational context, learning occurs in a number of different ways; however Mitchell and Sackney highlight that action learning or research is the most useful strategy for professional and organizational development as it blends a number of learning techniques, thus providing flexibility (p.34).

Action Learning (Research) involves working on real problems, focusing on the learning acquired and taking action on the solutions developed. It uses reframing to move into the experimental phase and involves critical thinking and reflection. It also builds upon pre-existing knowledge but re-examines it critically to see if its goals are matching its outcomes. It's a flexible approach to school development through critically informed action and reflection that is grounded in the real, complex and often confusing circumstances and constraints of contemporary school life.

Facilitation of Knowledge Construction

Is a continuous process of learning and teaching within the learning community. This knowledge for staff may come through professional development opportunities; however they note that professional development should honour existing knowledge and build upon it as well as build upon the realities of the educators and their shared experiences, to find out whats working and not and what can be reconstructed.

They highlight that the construction of new knowledge in a school needs to acknowledge the past in a respectful way, while providing opportunities for innovation and improvement. It was highlighted that this can occur through unplanned informal learning opportunities in which staff can share new practices and ideas with each other.

INTERPERSONAL CAPACITY

BUILDING THE LEARNING COMMUNITY CLIMATE

Learning takes place through interactions with and between a number of people who operate as a community of learners. It is a heavily contested process of negotiation among different people with different knowledge bases, different histories, different hopes and aspirations, different personal styles and emotions, and different desires and needs. This is a dynamic process that moves in cycles of periods with activity and inactivity.

The nature of learning implies that there needs to be two conditions of the school culture.

Affective Climate

Elements of an Affective Climate

Affirmation: This element is concerned with valuing the input of others by providing opportunity for all to have input

Invitation: For those who are quiet or do not contribute should be invited to. These efforts need to be sincere to encourage participation.

Trust: Staff need to trust in each other and know that their leaders "walk the talk".

Caring: Should permeate from all aspects of the school from curriculum to relationships and organization.

Relationships: Learning community is a community of relationships and through these relationships and connections individuals learn. (p.46-51)

Cognitive Climate

Relies on collection reflection and personal conversations and is heavily influenced by social constructivism.

Ideas about learning, teaching and curriculum and assessment need to be negotiated with all members of the learning community. The social construction of knowledge is expected to emphasize authentic learning

Reflective practices are difficult but should be built into the school structure and carefully facilitated.

Through Professional conversations individuals can explore each others mental models and help to develop common understandings. These are in depth conversations among educators about specific professional issues, problems, concerns, perplexities and mysteries.

Provides opportunities to develop new understandings. All do not need to agree but there should be a mutual respect that leads to a reconstruct of the collective narrative. (p.52-56)

BUILDING THE TEAM

Whats in a team ?

Mitchell and Sackney highlight that teams in a learning community are made up of members who are charged with a moral purpose and with clear and present responsibility for the growth and development of one another and the school.

In order for the team to be successful, there needs to be collaboration with the team members. As they stated in this chapter, team members represent the cognitive scaffolds for which others can stand on to gain new insights.

As the realm of education is extremely complex, collaboration with all team members (including students, parents and community stakeholders) is important. Collaborative practices also support personal capacity growth as it encourages networking.

image source:https://coursehorse.com/nyc/classes/professional/construction/4-hr-supported-scaffold-

Developing and Maintaining and Effective Team

The authors acknowledged that teamwork is not an easy process and as such there needs to be ongoing investment in team development to promote understanding and to develop capacity to work well in an interpersonal milieu. In order to develop and maintain an effective team they encourage the following 10 conditions:

1) Positive team norms

2) Clear sense of purpose

3) Relaxed, informal and comfortable

4) Participation is inclusive

5) Active listening

6) Civilized disagreement

7) Consensus

8) Trust

9) Leadership is shared

10) Continual maintenance

As this is a collaborative process, there is a strong emphasis on shared responsibility in terms of vision and work to build and maintain an effective team (p.60).

ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY

OPENING DOORS AND BREAKING DOWN WALLS

Organizational capacity to support improved teaching and learning is enhanced when structures create opportunities for growth and development while addressing deficits that lead to isolation and separation in school systems. The structures the authors have highlighted that are important in developing organizational capacity are socio-cultural, collaborative processes and structural arrangements (p.78).

Socio-cultural

Failing to address negative undercurrents can lead to a toxic learning environment and contribute to isolation of team members. Efforts should be made address these concerns in a collegial way to promote inclusiveness.

Misconceptions surrounding the need for ongoing learning affects morale and contribute to a culture of fear. They note that knowledge gaps should be perceived as opportunities for growth. Investing in a positive socio-socio-cultural structure will promote individuals to want to contribute to the learning environment.

Structural Arrangements

Re-structuring and developing new structural arrangements in schools allow for innovation and collaborative practices.

Developing flexible structures that support personal development, professional learning such as mentoring programs can create environments for growth.

Mitchell and Sackney also suggest that shift from hierarchal leadership to one that disperses power will assist in creating a learning community that works with the team as opposed to creating pockets of control.

In order for structural arrangements to be successful there needs to be strong lines of communication.

Collaborative Processes

The authors suggest that in the learning community, the discourse needs to be structured around the perplexities of teaching and learning rather than around mundane events or institutional information.

It was highlighted that this discourse should be accessible to all in the learning environment. Through this collaborative processes such as professional discussions amongst team members it will help for individuals and the group to make sense of different events, conditions or circumstances of the learning environment.

SHARING LEADERSHIP AND SHARING POWER

Mitchell and Sackney highlight that learning and the development of a learning community can best develop in an environment of shared leadership and shared power (p.93).   The following identifies conditions in which leadership can be shared in an organization

Leadership as a Systematic Condition

Administrators need to create conditions in which power can flow through multiple levels while drawing upon expertises and strengths of those in the learning community

Leadership as a Cultural Condition

Elements this condition would include trust, caring, commitment, common knowledge, equity and democracy.   This can be developed through dynamic harmonization, dialogue team building and effective communication.

Leadership as a Political Condition

Occurs in schools on micro level. Critical leadership and discussion allow for imbalances to be identified and readjusted while promoting fairness and equity.

Leadership as Influence

This represents a dynamic relationship where leader and follower roles are interchanged and influence can be multi-directional. When managed in a positive way, it can influence positive change in the learning community.

Leadership as Direction

Leadership is important in guiding school processes and in enhancing teaching and learning.

Leadership as Change

Leaders need to assist staff to understand how new initiatives fit as well as how it can benefit their professional practice. Effective leadership helps to build upon the strengths of the past by developing new and innovative strategies.

Image source: http://glenwoodia.com/classes-forming-now-for-mills-county-leadership/

MAKING IT SO

A Framework of Practice

Engaging the Administrative Cadre

The Principal should model active professional learning and collaborative engagement. Development can occur top down, outside in, inside out and bottom up.
Principals have the ability to influence others in the school to create and develop learning communities.

Creating Sustainable Conditions

Conditions must support individual and collective professional learning.
This can be done by understanding the culture in the school and deciding on what norms and values need to be retained and which ones need to be changed.

Develop a Learning Architecture

The development of learning teams can assist in implementing new curricula, strategies and reporting procedures. Learning agents are also valuable i creating opportunity and space for professional learning.
In order to sustain ongoing development, structures need to be implemented that support flexibility and feedback. This part of the framework is critical in bringing life to the learning community.

Going through Phases and Cycles

It is important to recognize that this is not a linear process and that there will be phases. Three learning phases will include: naming and framing, analyzing and integrating and applying and experimentation.

RETROSPECT AND PROSPECT

A look to the past to make a case for the future

The current structure of schools, schooling as well as teaching and learning are mechanistic in nature and due to the bureaucratic processes impedes individual and team professional growth as well as from an organizational standpoint.

A learning community places the lifeworld at the centre of the educational process. By investing and valuing the individuals in this system, it encourages contributions and collaboration towards a shared vision. Through the sharing of accountability and responsibility it places importance on building organizational structures that are flexible while acknowledging learning community as system. As such it is cognizant that changes in one area will have an effect in others.

Transitioning from one worldview to another presents itself with a number of challenges. It was highlighted that transitioning will signify loss for some and that as such there needs to be allowance for grieving to occur. To support this, the past should be honoured with respect and integrity. It is important that Educational Leaders, allow for the learning community members to develop their own transition path the leadership and learning that occurs. This can be supported by allowing for flexibility and investment in professional development to assist in building capacity.

Critical Review

Mitchell and Sackney did an admirable job at presenting learning communities as ecosystems and how they need to be nurtured to be sustainable and grow. By illuminating the personal, interpersonal and organizational elements of this system, they were effectively able to demonstrate how increased capacity in one area will promote growth in another.   Using case examples from their previous research and experience was beneficial in developing a deeper understanding of their theory and how it relates to practice.

Drawing upon Senge several times in their book, they present the importance of looking at learning communities and the education system as whole, and how changes in one area may have the potential to affect several other areas in both positive and negative ways, thus representing a systems thinking approach to developing a new image of how we view schools.

Given this I would highly recommend this book to anyone who is looking for strategies at developing renewal within the education system that not only engages individuals but also groups and organizational structures with a wholeness perspective on focus on critical reflection. Educational Leaders can look to this book at as a blueprint in helping to place focus on the humanity elements in the education realm.

<u>Discussion Questions</u>

1) **In what ways can we promote critical ?**

2) **How can we as professionals build upon current networking opportunities and practices?**

3) **How do we honour old tried and true practices while implementing new and innovative ones?**

Mitchell, C., & Sackney, L. (2000). Profound Improvement: Building Capacity for a Learning Community. Lisse: Swets & Zeitlinger.