

**PROFESSIONAL
DEVELOPMENT
IN RELATIONAL
LEARNING
COMMUNITIES**

Teachers in Connection

Miriam B. Raider-Roth

Foreword by Sharon Feiman-Nemser



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Teachers in Connection

We live in an era in which the definition of *teacher* is in full-scale crisis. The conception of teacher has drifted toward that of “educational clerk,” purveyor of skills, and one who does not make decisions about the content and pedagogy in the classroom but delivers that which others—often remote political officials and academic “experts”—deem important (Kumashiro, 2010; Sleeter, 2008; Zeichner, 2010). In addition to creating a technical professional, rather than a thoughtful, reflective, and intellectual one, teachers in this setting have little use for what they know. As they enact curriculum devised by others and implement mandated products, what happens to the “wonderful ideas” (Duckworth, 2006) that they construct in response to what they see happening in their classroom? Teachers risk “not knowing what they know” in order to comply with the mandates and scripts assigned to them to perform. In such a context, agency and voice are eroded. Building on the work of Apple (1996) and Sachs (2003), Zeichner (2010) argues for the importance of “democratic professionalism,” which emphasizes “collaborative and cooperative action” as an essential response to a growing technocratic view of the teaching professional.

Current trends in professional development, however, do not mirror democratic professionalism. Teachers’ success is measured by how much they raise students’ test scores, rather than how much they refine and improve their practice (Sleeter, 2014). Despite a solid trajectory of research demonstrating that transformative professional development requires sustained, deep, local, and actively oriented learning (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009; Dorph, 2011; Guskey, 2002), we have witnessed a retreat from such collaborative models (Wei, Darling-Hammond, & Adamson, 2010). Instead, we see an increase in professional development that is focused on “‘product implementation’ aligned with standards and standardized tests” (Zeichner, 2010, p. 1546). Resources that once supported collaborative teacher study are disappearing from the landscape of professional development (Randi & Zeichner, 2004).

RELATIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

This volume argues for the need for models of professional development that nurture a democratic, relational, and connected form of teaching. Lasting and transformative teacher learning can occur in the context of relational learning communities (RLCs)—teacher learning groups in which explicit attention is paid to the construction and nurturing of relationships between and among the participants, facilitators, texts/content, and context (Raider-Roth, Stieha, Kohan, & Turpin, 2014). Within the context of trustworthy relationships, teachers can reconnect with all that they know about teaching, learning, and their own identities (Gilligan, 1996; Raider-Roth, 2005a). They are then able to act on what they know in the best interest of their students. Such action allows teachers to cultivate their voices to participate in democratic life and model such action for their students.

The concept of RLCs is informed by and builds on research examining the place of collective and collegial forms of teacher professional learning. These groups are often referred to as communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), professional learning communities (PLCs), professional communities (Little, 2006), study groups (Hollins, McIntyle, DeBose, Hollins, & Towner, 2004), and teacher learning groups (TLGs) (Allen, 2013). The RLC model is also informed by those scholars investigating the nature of transformative professional development in collective settings (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Kegan & Lahey, 2009; Mezirow, 2012; Miranda, 2012; Whitcomb, Borko, & Liston, 2009). The necessity of collective learning has been shown to be especially important for professional development (PD) that focuses on questions of diversity, culture, and identity because the relational needs and dynamics here are even more significant than in other PD settings (Jurow, 2009). When PD supports teachers' understandings of diverse cultures, matters of identity (theirs and their students') become a central dimension of the learning experience (Beijaard, Verloop, & Vermunt, 2000; Rodgers & Scott, 2008). As teachers examine their cultural assumptions, as well as their own personal and professional identities, they can experience feelings of vulnerability and empowerment (Miranda, 2012). Such emotions can derail the learning process if learners are not supported by processes and colleagues that can build a bridge to new learning. An RLC can provide a "holding environment" (Winnicott, 1960, Kegan, 1994)—a space in which risks can be taken and collegial support shared—that offers participants "an evolutionary bridge, a context for crossing over" to construct new knowledge (Kegan, 1994, p. 43).

What distinguishes the RLC from these other frameworks is its explicit attention to the creation of, maintenance of, and reflection on the functioning of relationships, understanding that the quality of learning is only as strong as the relationships in which the learning is constructed

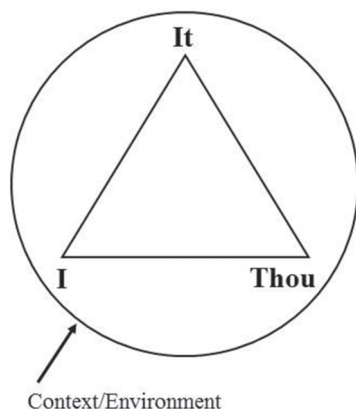
(Raider-Roth, 2005a). In addition, RLCs attend to the identity challenges that can be evoked by subject matter, such as the study of culture.

This kind of work is profoundly both psychological and intellectual, as well as deeply contextual. In making connections to self, others, and content and context, aspects of personal, professional, and cultural identities are often confronted. These identity confrontations can be especially charged in the current depersonalized and disconnected culture of teaching. In reconnecting with knowledge about self, others, and the contexts in which they live—that may have been “shelved” or walled off (because of the inability to act on such knowledge)—teachers can experience myriad emotions. The intensity of experience can even lead to a “shutting down” of the learning process (Raider-Roth, Stieha, & Hensley, 2012). Thus, teacher educators must be alert to, and skilled in, facilitating RLCs to maximize connections, identify ruptures, and construct opportunities for repair that help participants understand the differences and tension that may have led to a break in relationship. Such moments of repair are crucial learning moments.

A critical dimension of RLCs is that of content, or the focal subject area for which an RLC was created. An important dimension of the place of the content/subject matter in professional development is that of understanding the relationship between *what* and *how* subject matter is being studied (Shulman & Sherin, 2007; Van Driel & Berry, 2012). Indeed, Grossman, Wineberg, and Woolworth (2001) identify this dual focus of studying content knowledge and the associated pedagogies as “an essential tension of teacher community” (p. 951). Taking this tension seriously means understanding the dynamics of relationship in adult learning that can sustain the construction of enduring knowledge of self, others, and content.

A core educational theory underlying the discussion that follows stems from David Hawkins’s triangular model of the essential relationships in teaching and learning. In his landmark essay, “I, Thou, and It,” Hawkins (1974/2002) argues that the relationships among teachers, students, and subject matter create a unique form of relationship that is different from friendship or familial ones. He argues that there is a deep and abiding interdependence among teacher, learner, and subject matter—or the I, Thou, and It. Each dyad in this triangle is informed and shaped by the other dyads. The third learning partner of the “it” is what distinguishes this relational dynamic from other types of relationships. Many scholars have built on Hawkins’s work to add the circle of “context” around the triangle, highlighting the importance of the context or environment in which these learning relationships exist (e.g., Ball & Forzani, 2007; Raider-Roth, 2005a; Rodgers, 2002; Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006; see Figure I.1). While some refer to this triangular model as the “instructional triangle,” my colleagues and I have given it a new name—“the relational triangle”—to highlight the centrality of the dynamics of relationship that occur within and around the triangle and its

Figure I.1. The Relational Triangle



context. This model helps us understand the way the content/subject matter/texts mediate the relationships in an RLC.

Through a process of association and connection to self, others, and texts, RLCs can rekindle a vision of teaching that is agentic—where change is envisioned and acted upon. This requires being able to ask the questions “What needs to change in my classroom, school, and community?” and “How can my teaching help make this happen?” This is a vision of the teacher as a creator of social change (Counts, 1932/1978). Such a process of connection and association can undermine the disconnecting and depersonalizing forces being exerted in the arena of schooling today. This volume seeks to contribute to the educational landscape by making a case for such a vision of teaching.

TEACHING AND LEARNING ABOUT CULTURE

One domain in which teaching for social change is paramount is in the teaching and learning of culture. As Geneva Gay (2000) argues, “Culture is at the heart of all we do in education, whether that is curriculum, instruction, administration, or performance assessment” (p. 8). Building on Delgado-Gaitan and Trueba’s (1991) work, she defines culture as “a dynamic system of social values, cultural codes, behavioral standards, worldviews, and beliefs used to give order and meaning to our own lives as well as the lives of others” (p. 8). This definition and understanding of culture and education provides a useful frame for this volume.

Teaching about culture in schools is delicate and necessary work in order to construct deeper, more nuanced knowledge and build stronger ties between students and teachers from diverse walks of life. Such teaching

requires in-depth learning. RLCs are particularly important in professional development opportunities that focus on the study of culture. This kind of inquiry often encourages participants to examine their own cultural identities, leading to explorations of cultural assumptions, biases, and questions (Juwon, 2009). This is highly personal and vulnerable work, and the community in which such learning occurs can both support and impede the quality of knowledge constructed (Banks et al., 2007; Cochran-Smith, 2004). With this in mind, this book will focus on the construction of, enactment of, and lessons from RLCs that focus on the study of culture.

The field of multicultural education has long considered the theory and practice of teaching of culture. A most useful framework in this regard is James Banks's (2009) model of multicultural education that reflects four levels of integrating multicultural content into school curriculum: the contributions approach, the additive approach, the transformation approach, and the social action approach. In short, the contributions approach uses a rather superficial technique by focusing "on heroes, holidays, and cultural elements" (Banks, 2009, p. 238). Nothing is done to change the structure or goals of the course. In a sense, it is a nod to a surface level of culture. The additive approach goes one step deeper, adding "content, concepts, themes, and perspectives" without changing the curricular structure (p. 238). In this approach, a book or unit might be added without changing the course in any substantive way. The transformation approach "changes the basic assumptions of the curriculum and enables students to view concepts, issues, themes, and problems from several ethnic perspectives and points of view" (p. 242). In this approach, the nature of teaching and learning must shift to invite discussion, create the opportunity to voice multiple and differing perspectives, and encourage the understanding that a cultural artifact, belief, or value can be understood in many ways, depending on the life histories, cultural background, and ethnicities that are part of each person's life journey. The last approach is that of social action, which includes all the elements of the transformation approach but adds components that require students to make decisions and take actions related to the concept, issue, or problem studied in the unit (p. 245). Banks's model strongly informs the discussion that unfolds in this book.

The following chapters focus on the ways in which RLCs were cultivated in three summer seminars focusing on the teaching and learning of Jewish culture. The faculty team that developed and facilitated these seminars strived for the transformation approach through the particular relational-cultural pedagogies we chose (see Chapter 3), in addition to the particular ways that we defined the notion of text and the particular texts we selected to study (see Chapter 5). We hoped that the seminar would help the participants build the capacity and confidence to take action when they returned to their schools and home settings, thereby embracing the social action approach.