

Phi Delta Kappa As a Professional Learning Community: Voluntary Network Variation

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Professional learning communities are *de rigueur* these days in which site-based groups seek and share ideas to enhance their professional learning around issues of concern (Hord, 1997).

PDK's U of Toronto chapter, like other chapters, is an example of a network of volunteers. Such networks are off site or spread across many sites, including online. Sometimes these voluntary networks are connected to or affiliated with large teacher professional bodies including unions and networks such as the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development and Phi Delta Kappa who have paid staff handling head office administration, marketing, and professional development. State or provincial subject councils are also run by volunteers, but have the advantage of formally recognized connections to official curricula.

Little has been written about voluntary teacher networks until recently when Case and Werner (2005) analyzed the power of a new network on critical thinking in existence for about a decade. Myers (2008) applied their understandings to a network with a history of nearly three decades. How do affiliate chapters of PDK, using U of T's 50+ year history—enough to go beyond the original generation of founding members and leaders—measure up to criteria established by Case and Werner consisting of a motivating powerful idea combined with important conditions to enable a network's growth and maintenance around such an idea? What makes such networks professional learning communities?

The Power of an Engaging Idea

To be successful any voluntary teacher network needs to focus around a big idea. The idea can only take hold if it meets the following conditions:

A) The idea must be engaging so that its perceived power can provide motivation and glue for its many advocates. "Education as a Public Good" meets this criterion. With rare exceptions this is a given in most countries in the world though there is still much to do in fulfilling the promise of educating girls in some parts of the world and attaining education for high school and beyond for all in the 21st century.

B) It must meet a perceived need. The education as a larger public or societal good has been considered a means to meet a variety of needs since its beginnings a century and a half ago. These have included:

- basic skills for the workforce
- infusion of a set of values and moral precepts
- specialized career and vocational training
- a humane alternative to child labour
- basic knowledge for active and purposeful citizenship
- the development of specific talents from sports to the arts

C) It is inclusive in that depending on this jurisdiction “public good” can be flexibly defined. In pluralistic societies allowances may include faith-based systems such as the Catholic system in Ontario or the linguistic-based systems in Québec.

D) Education as a public good has both conceptual and practical clarity. This may result in what Case and Werner suggest is a necessary exclusiveness, notwithstanding the previous point. In this case public schooling is entitled to funding through taxation and a much greater degree of government supervision through a variety of governance procedures contained in provincial, state, or national statutes.

E) Education as a public good has generative potential in that it may motivate all members of the educational community to think seriously about the implications of putting our young in the charge of paid professional who are not their parents. Parent councils, community groups and media attention though not always thoughtful in their concerns, have attested to this potential. For example, the emergence of the online world has entered the classroom with the accompanying debate about how education can be improved for all.

One Powerful Idea + Enabling Conditions = Success

Powerful engaging ideas are necessary but not sufficient for ensuring the long-term success of a voluntary network. PDK’s affiliated chapters have prospered or fallen because of what Case and Werner have identified as “enabling conditions” allowing the organization to continue its existence. The recent Leadership and Planning Conference in Niagara Falls, Ontario (July 11, 2009) bringing together local chapters from Canada and New York State, demonstrated these conditions in action including the following.

A) *Rich exemplars* including useful resources and powerful stories from real teachers working in real classrooms. In the case of the former, PDK is rich in its publications as a visit to its international website and U of Toronto’s website can attest. The London chapter presented their

rich work with blogs and their Young Writers Contest work, along with an example of collaboration with two local school districts to survey attitudes towards homework.

B) The tasks of network building and network participation also rely on *credible advocacy*. Members present and past of the Toronto chapter have been a who's who of Ontario education from classroom teachers to university teachers to deputy ministers of education and directors of school districts. Credible advocates “walk the talk,” and PDK has been particularly fortunate throughout its history having its share within the network. In addition to local advocates in Ontario, including teachers, consultants, and administrators, local chapters also enjoy input from PDK International and other regional chapters as was the case in this conference.

C) Teachers also need to see that there are clear benefits for belonging to a network. Case and Werner note the importance of *diverse incentives* including

- the power of the idea itself
- the pursuit of a common vision— the *sine qua non* of any collaborative endeavour
- opportunistic piggy-backing of the work and membership of PDK’s local chapters to other like-minded groups
- the power of collaboration itself since, as Fullan has noted, “There is a ceiling effect to how much we can learn [or accomplish] if we keep to ourselves” (1993, p. 17).
- the existence of useful materials and routes to quality professional development such as U of Toronto’s research series
- the awards programs offered at the local and international level.

D) A fourth condition leading to success for the U of T chapter has been its *responsive leadership* over the years. It has been responsive in that it has

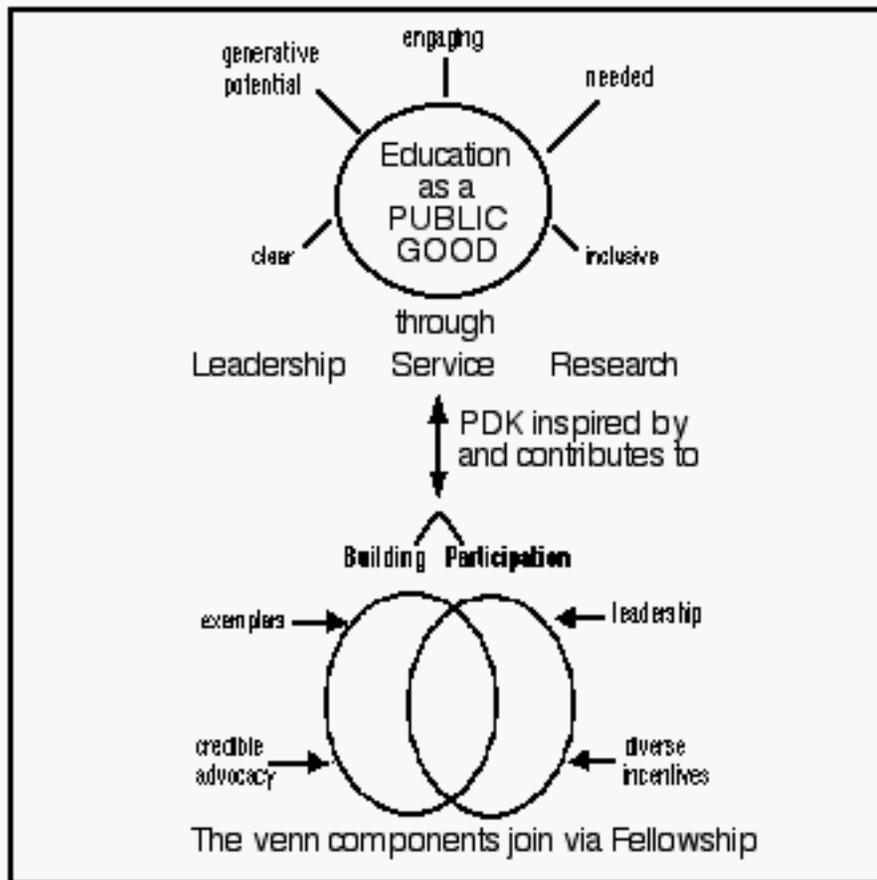
- promoted a flexible group of network builders to change with the times and allowed us to move between building and participation tasks (represented by the venn diagram below); the fact that membership in the executive has changed over the years has kept the organization fresh
- been conscious of monitoring the quality of its meetings and ensuring appropriately democratic decision-making
- monitoring the quality of our conference through careful needs assessment of participants and matching sessions to these perceived needs; this includes food and hospitality
- reviewing the entire network operation from time to time to ensure renewal of its mandate and vision

- adapting to the power and potential of online work.

E) The work at the leadership conference suggests a fifth enabling condition for networks as long lasting as PDK and individual chapters such as U of T's; namely, *fellowship*. While this enabling condition may fit under other categories such as benefits, it was featured prominently in the feedback in my part of the conference. Such a focus corresponds to what we know long-term group success depending on artful blending of task and social-emotional behaviours to achieve a common goal. When the going gets tough we need to trust each other enough to work things through, as in any relationship.

In Conclusion?

There are, of course, future concerns for PDK chapters, perhaps none as important as inviting a new generation of building to take their place in promoting education as (and for) a public good) by linking our actions as a network to our belief in this powerful idea with important links to other powerful ideas.



References:

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A Postscript: Chapter Revival Tips In Addition to the Above

1. Invite your professional colleagues who are friends and who have a common if vaguely articulated interest in improving their professional practise and / or networking potential.
2. Make sure the early meeting have a social component. If people are going to take additional time to meet, it should be fun.
3. If you do not have a clearly articulated professional goal, invite someone (a credible advocate) to share both experiences and possibilities. The rhetoric of change is just that unless there are clear and feasible directions to pursue. PDK offers many choices to start.