# Facilitating Professional Learning Communities Among Higher Education Faculty: The Walden Junto Model

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**Abstract**

Virtual Professional Learning Communities (PLC) have become an innovative way to meet the professional development needs of faculty in the online learning environment. Walden University's model for PLCs, the Walden Junto, uses a combination of synchronous and asynchronous online strategies and is based on a philosophy that embraces the faculty members' needs for professional growth as well as building community among the faculty population. However, previous research into virtual PLCs has examined either exclusively synchronous or asynchronous settings and has primarily focused on the processes of the community rather than outcomes. The intent of this research was to determine the impact of participation in the Walden Junto on faculty perception of collegial relationships and on classroom performance. An exploratory survey design was employed to answer these research questions. The survey was administered to volunteers from the population of faculty who participated in a Walden Junto within a one-year time frame. Descriptive statistics and chi square analysis were used to examine the data. Findings suggest that a PLC model such as the Walden Junto can be a means to reinforce participants' needs for belonging through collaboration and sharing of resources. In addition, it may be an appropriate professional development activity to create knowledge transfer to practice in some faculty roles.

**Introduction**

Faculty development at institutions of higher education is a complex but salient component of positive instructional outcomes (McKee & Tew, 2013). Since instructor quality is a predictor of successful student learning outcomes (Kane, Shaw, Pany, Salley, & Snider, 2016) organizations should view faculty needs as critically important. Faculty developers also need to consider innovative and creative ways to support faculty (Herman, 2012; Huston & Weaver, 2008).

Faculty development can include provisions for the needs of the individual, department and the organization as a whole. These offerings are often in the form of passive learning events such as workshops, seminars and structured courses (Steinert, 2010). Such static content courses and seminars are typically not focused on individual needs and frequently lack an open exploration of professional issues and reflection on new ideas (McConnell, Parker, Eberhardt, Koehler, & Lundeberg, 2012; Urquhart, et. al, 2013). These environments are also missing opportunities to build trust by sharing challenges and helping each other. Furthermore, these learning events ignore faculty members' unique sets of skills, experiences, levels of expertise and motivation (Cox, 2012; Koch, 2008). An additional complication is the growing instance of online academics who can be isolated from peers and not able to travel to face-to-face events (Brooks, 2010; Cady & Rearden,

2009; McAllister, Oprescu, & Jones, 2014).

In recent years, the concept of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) has emerged as a mechanism to address challenges faculty developers face when creating professional development opportunities for diverse faculty populations (Thompson, Jeffries, & Topping, 2011; Weibenrieder, Roesken-Winter, Schueler, Binner, & Blomeke, 2015). Designed to be engaging and collegial, PLCs have also gained popularity in virtual communities to bring isolated faculty together for the mutual benefit of the individual and the institution (Blitz, 2013; McConnell, Parker, Eberhardt, Koehler, & Lundeberg, 2012).

**Professional Learning Communities**

Mintzes, Marcu, Messerchmidt-Yates and Marlk (2013) define a PLC as, "a group of teachers… meeting together on a regular basis to improve student learning" (p. 1204). They draw on diverse techniques to meet a variety of teaching and learning goals. In these groups, both seasoned and novice faculty are able to come together, share ideas, and build relationships in a collaborative, individually focused learning setting (McAllister, Oprescu, & Jones, 2014). More significant, when using an online, virtual structure, the PLC can be a means for isolated professionals to engage with their colleagues in a meaningful discourse that leads to the development of both relationships and skills (Brooks, 2010; McAllister, Oprescu, & Jones, 2014).

Contemporary PLCs incorporate a myriad of designs and structures to support the diverse members they embrace. Dufour (2004), an early proponent of PLCs for faculty development, suggested they focus on learning, development of culture, and ensuring results. Additionally, a commonality of the PLC, according to Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002), is that they afford professionals the opportunity to share practice concerns and increase their skills and expertise. Since PLCs are knowledge-based with dynamic social interactions (Brooks, 2010; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002), they have the potential to support relationships by cultivating collaboration, emotional support, and shared understandings of diverse perspectives (Mintzes, Marcu, Messerchmidt-Yates, & Mark, 2013).

In recent years, the delivery of the PLC has evolved from traditional face-to-face methods to now including blended and virtual designs. Virtual PLCs have been an option for rural or isolated faculty members (Hodes & Cady, 2013; Matzat, 2013) and have been found to benefit learners because of their flexibility and provisions for collaboration within an expanded time and space (Blitz, 2013). Virtual learning communities, according to Ford, Branch and Moore (2008) are a type of PLC facilitated solely through internet resources. They may be facilitated synchronously through video mediated software such as Skype or other videoconferencing tools. They may also be facilitated asynchronously via discussion boards, blogs, or learning management system software. Outcomes for faculty participants in virtual PLCs include shifts in knowledge, cognition, beliefs, and professional behaviors (Blitz, 2013; Mintzes, Marcu, Messerchmidt-Yates & Mark, 2013).

**Sense of Community**

In addition to enhancing knowledge, faculty development through a PLC can establish collegial, academic networks, as well as provide a way for faculty to best influence and promote student success (Kane, Shaw, Pany, Salley, & Snider, 2016). In the PLC, the collaborative nature of the structure is that the collective output is more valuable and robust than individual efforts towards the same goal (Urquhart, et. al, 2013). Since PLCs are solution-focused, problems become topics of conversation rather than barriers to practice (McAllister, Oprescu & Jones, 2014). The result is a sense of collaboration, collegiality, and empowerment (Peppers, 2015).

Proponents of the PLC for faculty development embrace the notion that learning is a social process

and that participants learn through interactions with others (Smith & Rust, 2011). Since all members bring varied experiences to the community, a synergetic impact can result, creating enhanced outcomes for those involved as well as the organization as a whole. Participation in a PLC offers opportunities for faculty to establish relationships with their peers and better understand what they 'bring to the table' in terms of pedagogical skills and abilities (Lewis & Ewing, 2016; Weibenrieder, Roesken-Winter, Schueler, Binner, & Blomeke, 2015).

PLCs can also be a means for isolated professionals to engage with their colleagues in meaningful discourse that leads to both the development of relationships and skills (Cady & Rearden, 2009; Brooks, 2010; McAllister, Oprescu & Jones, 2014; Perry & Edwards, 2010). Professionals engaged in a PLC often seek out peers for learning, sharing, and other development activities (Sherer, Shea, & Kristensen, 2003). The collegial nature of this type of relationship allows for the generation of unique ideas, sharing of resources, and a team approach to disseminating research findings.

While some professional networks can emerge organically from a work setting in which colleagues have opportunities to engage in informal discourse, academics in an online setting can find this elusive. In these cases, it is important for the organization to create opportunities for faculty to identify like-minded individuals and support the development of these relationships (Steinert, 2010). As new technologies emerge that enable online communities to thrive, new possibilities for effective, virtual PLCs have become more commonplace (Meyer & Murrell; 2014).

The institutionally supported, online PLC is also ideal for both new and seasoned faculty. The new faculty member may have questions about how to form professional relationships in the online setting, as well as how to meet colleagues in their department or discipline (Brooks, 2010; Lewis & Ewing, 2016). PLC participation may be a catalyst for new professionals to gain knowledge, skills, and an understanding of the organizational culture (Urquhart, et. al, 2013). For experienced faculty, the PLC may provide opportunities to learn from peers (Lewis & Ewing, 2016; Urquhart, et. al, 2013) as well as move beyond acquiring knowledge to the critical analysis and application of important issues relevant to their practice.

**Learning Transfer**

A key outcome of the professional learning community is the implementation of new learning into practice (Blitz, 2013). This application of learning, also known as learning transfer, can be best described as the result that learning has on performance (Mayer, 2011). This specifically involves measuring the extent to which knowledge, skills, and/or attitudes are transferred from the training to the practice situation (Kirkpatrick, 1983). According to MacRae and Skinner (2011), there are three key areas that affect transfer of learning or training: learner characteristics, intervention design and delivery, and work environment influences. Each can be manipulated in the design of a PLC, creating a situation that capitalizes opportunities for learning transfer.

**The Walden Junto Model**

The Walden Junto was designed to meet growing requests among Walden faculty to share ideas with like-minded individuals in a structured setting. The junto was first established by Benjamin Franklin in 1727 as a means to share perspectives on a variety of topics and for mutual improvement (Philadelphia Junto, 1941). Franklin embraced the notion that the junto be a place where inquiry could be conducted in the spirit of collegial debate and respect for diverse perspectives (Labraree, Ketcham, Boatfield, & Fineman, 1964). Today, junto groups exist in many forms throughout the world and are used for a variety of purposes.

The Walden Junto model is based on Wenger's (1998) concept of a community of practice in that it (1) focuses on a clear need for knowledge sharing; (2) incorporates a paradigm that supports the building of trusting relationships; and (3) supports the development of skills necessary for successful

practice. The Walden Junto also embodies design features that Lauer, Chrisopther, Firpo-Triplett and Buchting (2014) found associated with positive participant impacts. These include opportunities for group discussion, pre-work activities, active learning, and participant centered tasks.

Organizational support is critical for the success of the PLC (Gray, Kruse, & Tarter, 2015; Peppers, 2015). Walden University encourages university wide-involvement by soliciting faculty interest and input, supporting collaboration across disciplines, and encouraging ongoing learning through reflection and professional discourse. In addition, Walden University supports the Junto by providing the technological infrastructure and staff to meet the needs of the community.

Specifically, the Walden Junto is a series of time-limited, facilitated dialogue groups designed to support a community of practice among colleagues. The goals of the Walden Junto are two-fold. First, the model is designed to provide a social component to encourage community building among faculty and give faculty an option for growth and development. The second goal of the Walden Junto is to generate conversation around best practices for teaching and learning in the online setting that could be incorporated into practice.

Each Walden Junto is limited to fifteen participants and uses a combination of asynchronous and synchronous virtual formats over four weeks. The session begins with a two week asynchronous session utilizing an online discussion forum where participants access reading materials and post their original thoughts about the resources. Next, a one hour synchronous session is offered to discuss topics and questions that emerged during the asynchronous session. Finally, a second one week asynchronous session provides the participants an opportunity (or place) to summarize ideas through questions and answers (or discussions) regarding the implementation and follow up. Walden Juntos are facilitated by faculty members who have an interest in the topic, but are not necessarily subject matter experts. The Junto facilitators choose a topic, identify scholarly material for contextual reading, facilitate the asynchronous discussion, and lead the synchronous session.

As suggested by Cooper, Grover, and Simon (2014), the Walden Juntos incorporate a user friendly interface that supports collaboration and the development of content that provides both contextual and philosophical questions. Participants in eight Walden Juntos offered over a one year period of time served as the population for the study. Walden Juntos were offered on the following topics:

- Doctoral Learning as a Transformative Process
- Doctoral Learning Readiness
- Problems with Problem Statements
- Team Teaching at Walden Residency
- Reflexivity in Qualitative Research
- First Year Learnings and Challenges for New Walden Faculty
- The Art and Science of Teaching Adults
- Lead Faculty as Peer Mentors

While PLCs have been used as a mechanism for professional development in a variety of settings for some time, (McAllister, Oprescu & Jones, 2014; McConnell, T., Parker, J., Eberhardt, J., Koehler, M., & Lundeberg, M., 2012; Meyer & Murrell, 2014; Weibenrieder, Roesken-Winter, Schueler, Binner, & Blomeke, 2015 ) the Walden PLC Junto model is a relatively new concept. Previously, Walden University embraced a more traditional model of seminar presentation for faculty development using internet tools for delivery to a dispersed population.

**Method**

However offered, virtual PLCs can be a viable option when concerns such as travel or location may be an obstacle to faculty participation in the community (Cady & Rearden, 2009; Lewis & Ewing, 2016: McConnell, Parker Eberhardt, Koehler, & Lundeberg, 2012). Yet, according to Blitz (2013),

more insight into their usefulness, particularly when using a combination of synchronous and asynchronous strategies, is needed. Anecdotal evidence suggested that faculty who engaged in the Walden Junto discussion groups found them academically stimulating and a means of networking with colleagues. While this feedback was encouraging, no empirical evidence existed to demonstrate the impact of participation in a PLC using both asynchronous and synchronous virtual strategies on faculty perceptions of collegial relationships. In addition, it was not clear how participation in this PLC structure might impact faculty performance in the classroom through learning transfer. Finally, given the diversity of faculty in the higher education setting, exploring the groups of faculty who found their participation most beneficial seemed useful.

An exploratory survey strategy was used to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the professional characteristics of Walden Junto participants?
2. To what extent do Walden Junto participants feel a sense of community?
3. To what extent do Junto participants transfer learning into their practice?
4. Is the development of a sense of community among Junto participants a predictor of transfer of learning into practice?

Exploratory surveys, according to Forza (2002), are appropriate when examining a phenomenon for which previous research is not available. In this case, while there is considerable literature on PLCs, there has been no research conducted with regard to specific modeling outcomes on sense of belonging and transfer of learning. Therefore, an exploratory survey design was adopted.

The survey was developed using a combination of three separate instruments. First, the Sense of Communality Index II (Chavis, Lee, & Acosta, 2008) was presented to participants in its entirety. The index includes 24 items that measure participants' sense of community on four subscales: membership, influence, meeting needs, and a shared emotional connection. The instrument uses a Likert scale in which respondents rate each question between 0 (Not At All) and 3 (Completely). Total Index reflects the sum of all 24 items for a potential range of scores between 0 and 72. Each of the subscales includes the summative ratings of six items to reflect a potential score between 0 and 18. The Sense of Community Index, as well as the subscales, has been determined to be a reliable measurement with a coefficient alpha of .94 and .79 to .86 respectively (Chavis, Lee, & Acosta, 2008).

Ten additional questions were added to the instrument by the researchers based on a review of the literature. The purpose of these questions was to determine the extent the faculty member implemented classroom strategies as a result of his or her participation in the Junto. Finally, two demographic questions were included that asked participants about their professional relationship with the Institution (i.e. full time faculty, part-time faculty with outside full-time jobs, part-time faculty at other universities as well as Walden, etc.) and in which Junto(s) they participated.

Walden Junto sessions are marketed and made available to the entire faculty body of approximately 3000 individuals, 91% of which are part-time. Faculty members contact the Center for Faculty Excellence via email to sign-up for a specific Junto session. The participants for this exploratory study were selected from faculty members who participated in a Walden Junto group within a single calendar year. An email invitation along with the consent form was sent to the entire population of 122 participating faculty members. This included those that participated in a single Walden Junto as well those that participated in multiples sessions. A follow up email was sent two weeks later with an additional follow up after a third week. Of the 122 potential participants, 26 responded.

## Findings

### Characteristics of the Junto Participant

Survey respondents were dispersed among all Junto groups with the highest representation from topics that focused on student writing, the lead faculty role, and doctoral learning. The self-identified role within the university was distributed among all options with the most often noted being instructor for doctoral courses, instructor for master's courses, and dissertation committee member. Participants categorized themselves in a variety of professional situations. The most often cited were having no other position outside of Walden University, consultant/self-employed while being employed part-time at Walden University, and part-time faculty at Walden as well as at least one other university.

**Sense of Community Index**

One of the purposes of the research was to determine the extent to which involvement in the Walden Junto created a sense of community among the participants. An analysis of the results from the Sense of Communality Index II (Chavis, Lee, & Acosta, 2008) was conducted to understand this research goal. Overall, Junto participants reported feeling a sense of community "somewhat" and "mostly" (M=34.08, S-13.45).

The Sense of Communality Index II subscale with the highest score was "*Reinforcement of Needs*" (M=1.19, SD=4.01). In this subscale, Junto participants most frequently reported that they "Mostly" got their needs met in the group. Salient issues explored in this subscale included members feeling important needs have been met because they have been part of the community, feeling the community has been successful in getting member needs met, feeling good because they have been a member, feeling that they can talk to members about problems, and having similar values, needs, priorities, and goals as other members of the group (Chavis, Lee, & Acosta, 2008).

The subscale with the lowest score, or the least sense of community, was the "*Membership"* subscale (M=6.27, SD=5.00). In this subscale, Junto participants reported that they got their membership needs met "Somewhat." Membership needs explored trusting community members, recognizing and being recognized by members, having community symbols, putting effort and time into the community, and having the community membership become part of the individual's identity (Chavis, Lee, & Acosta, 2008). Table 1 summarizes the mean scores and standard deviation for each of the four Sense of Community subscales analyzed.

Table 1

*Sense of Community Subscale Mean Scores*

| Subscale | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|
| Reinforcement of Needs | 11.19 | 4.01 |
| Influence | 9.15 | 3.46 |
| Shared Emotional Connection | 7.46 | 4.75 |
| Membership | 6.27 | 3.23 |

**Learning Transfer Index**

Another intended outcome of the research was to identify the extent the Junto participants transferred learning into their teaching or mentoring practice. More than three-fourths (77%) of the participants reported that they "agreed or strongly agreed" that they have implemented new strategies in their teaching and/or mentoring since being part of the Junto group. A slightly higher majority (81% and 77%) reported that they "agreed or strongly agreed" that being a participant in the Junto group gave them new ideas about teaching and/or mentoring. This suggests that almost all of the participants who gained new ideas about teaching and mentoring were able to implement those ideas in the classroom.

**The Relationship Between Sense of Community and Learning Transfer**

A chi square analysis was performed comparing the relationship of the total sense of community to the transfer of learning reported by participants. A chi square analysis was deemed appropriate in this case due to the exploratory nature of the study as well as the small sample size (Meyers, Gamst, & Guarino, 2006). Due to the small n size, the Total Sense of Community scale index was collapsed into three categories: 1 =somewhat, 2 = mostly, and 3 – completely. Using this scale, 23% of participants (n = 6) indicated that they "Somewhat" felt a sense of community through their affiliation with the Walden Junto, 69% of participants (n = 18) "Mostly" felt a sense of community, and 8% of participants (n = 2) felt a complete sense of community. In addition, due to the small n size, the only questions from the transfer of learning section of the survey used in the relational analysis was: "I have implemented new strategies in my teaching since being part of the Walden Junto" and "I have implemented new strategies in my mentoring since being a part of the Walden Junto."

With regard to teaching, the findings suggested no significant relationship between the sense of community experienced by participants and their reported transfer of learning to their teaching practice with $X2$ 6.916 (6) $p < .05$. The research did find a significant relationship between mentoring and participants' sense of community with $X2$ 13.926 (6) $p < .05$. Based on these findings, it was concluded that that Junto participants' transfer of knowledge to their mentoring was dependent on their total sense of community. Findings indicated that, as the respondents' sense of community increased their agreement also increased with regard to implementing new Junto strategies to their mentoring.

**Discussion**

While the sample for this study was small and should be interpreted with caution, findings concur with previous studies on the efficacy of PLCs. A PLC using synchronous and asynchronous virtual delivery strategies can be a means to reinforce participants' needs for belonging through collaboration and sharing of resources (Blitz, 2013; Hodes & Cady, 2013; Lewis & Ewing, 2016; Mintzes, Marcu, Messerchmidt-Yates & Mark, 2013; Weibenrieder, Roesken-Winter, Schueler, Binner, & Blomeke, 2015). Participation may also increase faculty members' feelings of empowerment with regard to their ability to influence student success through skill building (Kante, Shaw, Pany, Salley, & Snider, 2016; Peppers, 2015). Similar to Mintzes, Marcu, Messerchmidt-Yates and Mark's (2013) findings, the Walden Junto model PLC appeared to evoke emotional support and collegiality among participants.

As suggested by McAllister, Oprescu and Jones (2014), faculty members who practice solely in virtual environments may have fewer opportunities for development, academic discourse, and relationship building. Findings appear to support the notion that individuals with no other professional development opportunities are seeking collegial opportunities. This may include faculty members who work solely part-time or retired individuals who do not have a teaching relationship with another institution to participate in learning activities.

Application of learning to the professional setting is important, but difficult to measure. As faculty work through their professional development activities, how learning is manifested in the classroom needs to be examined to determine the potential impact of learning transfer (Blitz, 2013). A robust measure of learning transfer can be done through careful examination of instructor practices, which can be a time consuming and subjective process. A less empirical method provides for participant report, but may be an appropriate step in an exploratory measure of learning transfer.

As in any attempt to measure transfer of learning, barriers in measurement were evident in this study with the researchers relying on participant self-report. Given these limitations, it still appears that a

PLC model such as the Walden Junto may be an appropriate development activity to create a knowledge transfer to practice. Faculty members reported applying new knowledge, skills and/or attitudes to their classroom and/or mentoring practice due to their participation in the PLC (Kirkpatrick, 1983).

Interestingly, however, it appears the model may be a more effective development opportunity for some faculty roles than it is for others, such as mentoring versus instruction. Given the exploratory nature of this study and the small sample size, rationale for these differences could not be determined. Speculatively, it may be due to learner characteristics, the design or delivery of the individual sessions and/or organizational factors as described by MacRae and Skinner (2011). Additional research with larger sample sizes is needed to better understand how knowledge may be transferred to faculty instruction.

Another limitation of this study was a lack of faculty control group explored with regard to community building and knowledge transfer. A comparison of learning outcomes between the Walden Junto and more passive professional seminars with respect to these variables might provide additional insight into how the virtual learning environment influences professional community and classroom application.

**Conclusion**

Investing in professional development specifically designed to address the learning challenges of the remote faculty member affords an opportunity for organizations to build both individual and collective capacities. It also provides opportunities to cultivate actionable and effective contributions by its members regardless of distance and how employees are dispersed (Lewis & Ewing, 2016). PLCs have become an innovative way to meet individual faculty needs for collegial networking through scholarly discourse, sharing of knowledge and resources, and effective collaboration in a variety of settings (Thompson, Jeffries, & Topping, 2011; Weibenrieder, Roesken-Winter, Schueler, Binner, & Blomeke, 2015). For dispersed or professionally isolated faculty such as those in virtual learning settings, creating a PLC using the Walden Junto model may be a means by which organizations provide for those needs in an effective, meaningful way.

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