

## PARTNERSHIP LEARNING NETWORK BUILDS COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

*Joann Ricci and Rex Babiera*

More than 40 participants from Ball Foundation partnership sites convened in Chicago in late January to continue the work of the Partnership Learning Network (PLN) Community of Practice Meeting: A Journey to Community. Teachers, principals, central office staff and superintendents, along with Education Initiatives (EI) staff and Myron Rogers, an organizational change consultant, met with one purpose - to build a community of practice together. The foundation defines a community of practice as a group of practitioners who are dedicated to learning with and from one another in pursuit of promising instructional and organizational practices that support increased student achievement at each partnership site.

Etienne Wenger and Jean Lave introduced the term "communities of practice" to business and public sector organizations in 1991. This work emerged while Wenger and Lave

conducted research at the Institute for Research on Learning about how people naturally work together.

A widely adopted process in many corporations, communities of practice attempt to cut through fragmented learning and integrate it into organizations so that knowledge can spread easily and affect change. As a Xerox executive suggests, "Communities of practice are a diverse group of people engaged in real work over a significant amount of time during which they solve problems, learn and invent new things...in short, they evolve a practice that is highly skilled and creative."

School staff often do not share instructional practices that work or why they work with each other. A large part of EI's work with schools is to connect the school system to itself, ensuring a greater flow of information. Communities of practice provide processes

*continued on page 2*

# PARTNERSHIP LEARNING NETWORK...

continued from page 1

“I am still feeling invigorated and inspired by our recent Ball Foundation meeting. My affiliation with Ball has not only made me a better leader, but also a better person. For the opportunity to grow and learn alongside colleagues whom I respect and admire, I say thank you. My spirit was lifted and my hope renewed.”

*Teacher, Northview Public Schools*

and tools for educators to connect expertise and knowledge, thus making tacit knowledge explicit. This allows educators to solve problems, foster new knowledge and develop unexpected ideas and innovation about learning and teaching. The PLN community of practice work not only deepens these outcomes at each site, but also fosters greater learning across the four partnerships.

The foundation hosted a series of learning visits with partner school teams to learn more about the promising practices shared in Chicago. Teachers, principals and superintendents, who are the contextual experts at a partnership site, lead these site visits. Reflecting and serving as critical friends to one another’s work are also important aspects of these learning visits. Communities of practice will maximize the sustainability of a network of practitioners long after EI’s formal work with its partners ends.

The first of these learning exchanges occurred in late February 2004, when a team from Northview (MI) Public Schools visited the Chula Vista (CA) Elementary School District. Three additional visits took place in May 2004. A team from Springfield visited

Chula Vista. A team from the Arizona charter schools visited Springfield and a team from Chula Vista visited Northview.

Another aspect in the development of communities of practice in the PLN’s work will be helping partners develop and sustain their own communities of practice in a variety of additional ways. For example, community formation events will seed local communities of practice at individual partnership sites. The first of these local community formation events was held in May 2004 in Springfield. In addition, the PLN will convene its national meeting in October 2004 to integrate the learning that has happened among the sites, knitting together the community and what it knows.

As both the national and local communities of practice grow, it is the Ball Foundation’s vision that a culture of learning will emerge, one whose legacy is increasing literacy and achievement levels for all the students these communities serve. ■

---

## The Ball Foundation

The Ball Foundation is a 29-year-old non-profit operating foundation that conducts programs in two areas, Career Vision and Education Initiatives. The foundation also undertakes research to ensure the continuous improvement of its programs and practices. The foundation’s mission is to help individuals recognize and develop their potential.

### Board Members

G. Carl Ball, Sec.  
James Pearson, Pres.  
Anna Ball, VP  
Bob Hill, VP  
Peg Hendershot, VP  
Nick Kaskovich,  
Treas./Asst. Sec.  
George Ball, Jr.

Joanna Ball  
Denis Doyle  
Blouke Carus  
Bob Hildebrand  
Frank Pipp,  
Dir. Emeritus  
Barrie Ricketts  
Paul Schneider

## TESTIMONIAL LETTER

*The following is a letter from Vickie Douglas, literacy coach from Grant Middle School in Springfield, Illinois, written after her learning visit to Chula Vista in May.*

I would like to thank the Ball Foundation for giving the teachers in Springfield a chance to go on a learning visit to Chula Vista. Most of the schools we saw in California were a year ahead of us in their Focus on Results training. It was extremely powerful for me to see the progress they have made and to hear

their struggles. It's given me a deeper understanding of what the foundation is trying to accomplish. It's also made me a very zealous supporter of Focus on Results and Ball. The schools I visited inspired me and helped me to see the possibilities of what could lie in our future. I'll even go as far as to say, I've become a missionary to the cause.

I appreciate how we were treated as professionals. It's seldom that teachers feel the overwhelming respect that the foundation showed us. You taught us that we all have our areas of expertise that we can share with others, and that by engaging in conversations with our fellow educators about our struggles and successes, it can only enrich the learning for all of us.

Thank you for allowing us to receive Focus on Results training. Our school has chosen writing as a focus. It has given our school a common goal. Every teacher in our building wants our students to succeed, but we were approaching their education in a fragmented manner. Now our students are being taught a vocabulary that is consistent throughout the building. All of our teachers are becoming experts at incorporating writing into their content, and our students are becoming thinkers who can give a voice to their self-expression through writing.

I urge you to continue supporting education and giving teachers the opportunity to learn from their peers. I'm proud to say I teach at a Ball school. ■

### Response Journals

*What follows is one example of what occurred in Chicago when a team of educators from Springfield told their story about a promising practice: response journals.*

A response journal is a method for students to write responses to material they have read, evidencing their understanding of the text, encouraging reflection and, ultimately, making meaning. As the Springfield team shared the instructional practice, members from other partnerships inquired into the practice — what it is, how it works and why, who is involved and affected — uncovering practitioners' deep and tacit knowledge.

Through this practice of shared inquiry, the Springfield team was able to gain more knowledge about its own practices, reflect on how it could improve the response journal strategies, and identify new ways to use the journal process. The Chula Vista, Northview and Arizona teams were introduced in a relatively short time to a promising practice that they then could migrate to their schools. In addition, they deepened their relationships with one another, building a web of support between and among the partners for further learning and sharing. Since the meeting, the schools in Arizona have migrated this practice into the classroom and have continued the dialogue with the Springfield team to learn more about this literacy strategy. ■

## THE PLN COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE: Changing the way we work together

Myron Rogers and Joann Ricci

The winter issue of *Review* introduced communities of practice as a major strategy to accomplish the foundation's commitment to helping schools increase productivity, literacy and student achievement. As this initiative unfolds, it appears that establishing communities of practice is an effective process strategy that exponentially increases the possibility of systemic change.

Communities of practice can leverage any promising practice by connecting it to the knowledge and instructional practices already working in the system.

Content and process are integrated in communities of practice, and connections are made among the many circles of practitioners. Effective communities of practice do this with significantly fewer resources than top down, cascading approaches. They work with the network of relationships, the contextual expertise that resides everywhere in the system, and people's innate desire to do work that really matters.

Most change efforts begin from the unexamined assumption that a single new tool or technique, when taught by experts and applied rigorously, will bring about change throughout the system. The unconscious assumption that seems to be held is that content matters more than context—that knowledge is independent of the culture and dynamics that put it to use. The emphasis has been on what works to the exclusion of how it works and why. Effective communities of practice restore the balance between expertise and application, between what is known and how it works. They do this by beginning from a different understanding of how systems work and how to do powerful work within the system. There are several

assumptions or principles at work within communities of practice.

(See accompanying box, pg. 5.)

Here are two.

- *Access the intelligence already in the system.*

The first notion is that good work is happening everywhere in the system but tends to be isolated, fragmented and invisible to the school system as a whole. People in the system desire to do good work in service to children and one another. Most develop local knowledge, or home wisdom, that creates good outcomes. They make a critical writing program work, in spite of deficiencies in the curriculum, by tailoring it to the needs and abilities of children in their classroom. However, these innovative approaches are unseen by others in the system, and critical knowledge and learning are lost. Communities of practice create forums for people to share what's working and why. They allow the intelligence and learning in the system to be seen, appreciated and evaluated. This in turn leads to the evolution of practice, as more knowledge becomes available to more people in real work that matters.

- *Connect the system to itself.*

Most school systems are not in fact one community or one integrated system but layers of subsystems, each with its unique identity and focus. The fragmented nature of school systems is partly due to the fragmented nature of teaching—one teacher, one classroom. It is also partly due to the choices that have been made about how to use time. There are few

forums for teachers, administrators, or parents to come together in shared inquiry about what works and why. So a good community of practice will create forums for people across the school system to come together in shared work about questions that really matter to them. People get to share their real practice with others who share similar challenges. Exchange of knowledge generates innovation and new or evolving practices. People move toward a shared view of what matters, why it matters, and what to do about it. Isolated practitioners find their connection to others in the system through shared work. Practice evolves to be more consistent and rigorous throughout the system.

Working with processes founded on just these two assumptions can create coherence and integration. For instance, in Northview Public Schools, participants in the Partnership Learning Network have deepened their understanding of how to make use of their data warehouse, a Ball-funded initiative, more meaningful and effective for all. This has resulted in broadened participation of elementary school staff in re-thinking and re-designing data capture and reporting to make better informed instructional practice decisions.

*(See accompanying interview with Anita Flynn, pg. 6.)*

Tools, techniques and expert content do matter, but they are not enough. Educators and those who support their work need to go beyond the laboratory and access the real work of real people. When people's passion, creativity and intelligence come together around work that really matters, they create lasting impact, a legacy of capacity in schools to make a difference for all children. ■

### **Communities of Practice: Principle-Centered Work**

The development of communities of practice relies on many tools and processes. However, the work rests on some critical principles that relate to the understanding of community formation, inquiry and learning. These principles guide the design of the work, the choices made about how to work together and what work to do. When applied to real work, the principles should liberate people from the tyranny of technique and create the capacity to generate new tools in service to what needs to happen. Some of the principles of the community of practice are as follows:

- Communities of practice provide members access to all the intelligence in the system.
- Communities of practice eliminate fragmentation by connecting the system to more of itself.
- Promising practices are best learned from peers—those doing the work.
- Learning is supported by reflective space.
- Learning forums should be visible to the whole system.
- Every learning forum is an opportunity to strengthen the community of practice at all levels.
- Members of the community of practice are responsible for sharing what they know, engaging in mutual inquiry, and serving as critical friends to each other.
- The work of the community of practice resides in the authentic work of schools.
- Communities of practice nourish the network of relationships.
- Communities of practice work with what's working and what's possible, not with what's wrong.

## **IMPROVING PRACTICE: The Power of Community**

### **An Interview with Anita Flynn, 1st Grade Teacher, Northview Public Schools, Michigan**

*Myron Rogers*

*Background: Anita was part of the Northview team of teachers and administrators attending the January 2004 PLN community of practice formation meeting. She then joined the Northview—Chula Vista learning visit in February. This is an excerpt of the complete interview.*

**Review:** *Tell us a bit about your experience with the start up of the community of practice. What stands out from that first meeting?*

**Anita:** Well, when Mike Stearns (Northview Superintendent) first brought the Northview team together for planning for the January meeting, it was the first time we had ever met as a working group. We had to struggle with the idea of promising practices and what was important to each of us at our grade levels. It took us quite a bit of conversation to get a shared idea of what we could do. Mike wanted us to focus on our use of data, specifically our data warehouse. After some time, sharing ideas in conversation, we began to see that all of our promising practices (K-12) were linked together.

**Review:** *So you decided to focus on your use of data?*

**Anita:** Yes, but it wasn't easy. For me, my only introduction to this had been through a glossy presentation of handouts. It didn't mean much to me, and I never understood my part in it. But as we talked about what the data warehouse was for, what it could do for teaching practices, I began to create a picture of how all the parts fit together. By the end of the meeting, we had clarified our ideas and understood how each of our parts made up the whole. We really came together as a team.

**Review:** *The conversation then, created a shared understanding, and generated new possibilities for action. Did this change the way you used the data warehouse?*

**Anita:** Absolutely. After attending the January PLN meeting and sharing our work with other school districts, we asked ourselves, "What are we going to do next for Northview?" Through this work we discovered that the data warehouse wasn't useful for many teachers, especially elementary school teachers. Many of us had never been involved in defining what we really needed, or in the design of the warehouse. When we returned from Chicago, we shared our promising practice presentation in our schools, and suggested creating our own data warehouse for elementary schools. At the meetings, teachers and staff came up with ideas to make the warehouse useful. For us, there was a need for text and images, not just numbers. We're working with the technology people now to make this happen, and by next year we'll have the new system. We know it will help us focus our teaching and strengthen us in the process of becoming a stronger learning community. The opportunity I was given to go to Chicago changed how I've been involved in district initiatives.

**Review:** *You've become a real leader and co-creator of new practices. Then you went on the learning visit to Chula Vista. How did that affect you?*

**Anita:** It was the first time in a long time that I could just critically think about my teaching practice. Walking through classrooms in Chula Vista and seeing the focus of those schools visible on the walls and desks...understanding that my own classroom would reflect my practice and focus. This instantly changed my teaching. In Northview, we have three questions we pay attention to: 1. What do we want our students to learn? 2. How do we know if they are learning? 3. What are we going to do if they are not learning?

In conversations with my peers in Chula Vista, and walking through their classrooms, I suddenly understood a new and meaningful way to address these questions.

**Review:** *So what did you do then?*

**Anita:** Beginning on the flight home, I began to plot out some significant changes I wanted to make. I wanted to increase the quality of experience and overall learning experience in my classroom. When I got home, the first thing I did was a walk through of my own classroom. I just walked through my room with fresh eyes, bringing the power of the Chula Vista visit with me.

The first thing I implemented directly from Chula Vista was posting standards in my classroom. I had done this when I started teaching, and then dropped it. I saw the value of it in Chula Vista as I walked into their rooms and knew what was being taught. I became very critical of my own practice.

Another thing I learned was the importance of mapping. I've taken the notion of a learning journey into my classroom, and we've gone back and mapped where we've been, the journey of the whole year so far, and then we'll keep adding to it. We've mapped the content and steps in the journey, how skills and ideas build on one another—and we put actual student work on the map. We get to learn, move on, repeat, reassess, and practice. Everything I've done since Chula Vista has been a direct result of the experience of seeing a classroom and teaching through the eyes of those teachers. And I'm keeping the connection going. I've started a pen-pal program between my class and one in Chula Vista.

**Review:** *What's next?*

**Anita:** Well, Chula Vista is coming to visit Northview in May, and we see this as a good opportunity to expand our local community of practice. I think every teacher here should know what's happening and why, and we should invite teachers to open their classrooms to the visitors. We need to think through what the focus is, and it's a great opportunity to create some passion, excitement and learning.

**Review:** *Anything else you'd like to share?*

**Anita:** The community of practice experience has re-awakened my commitment to self-reflection, for really asking myself critical questions about my teaching, and taking the time to do so alone and with my colleagues. My own passion for this important work is alive. ■



*Flat Stanley and Friend  
Finney Elementary Cultural Awareness Program*

The Ball Foundation

800 Roosevelt Road, E-200  
Glen Ellyn, IL 60137

Review is a periodic  
newsletter produced by The  
Ball Foundation.

If you have any  
questions or comments,  
please call us at 630.469.6270  
or e-mail us at:  
[review@ballfoundation.org](mailto:review@ballfoundation.org)

Copies of this newsletter are  
also available at  
[www.ballfoundation.org](http://www.ballfoundation.org)

Articles may be reprinted  
with permission.

---

Non Profit  
Organization  
U.S. Postage  
**PAID**  
Glen Ellyn, IL  
Permit no. 522

---

## BOOK REVIEW

Rex Babiera

### ***Change Forces: The Sequel* by Michael Fullan**

The second book in Michael Fullan's *Change Forces* trilogy is an essential primer on the action implications of complexity and chaos theory on educational reform efforts. Fullan studies the dynamics of living systems and learning organizations and describes how they can enrich these efforts.

Drawing from a wide range of research on organizational learning, the book is dense with theory. However, many practical lessons can be found that provide a foundation for Education Initiatives' (EI's) work. For example, EI believes the quality of the relationships we build with our partners is critical, as trust is central to effectiveness of partnerships. Fullan observes, "The quality of the relationships among organizational members (as they evolve) makes for long-term success."

According to Fullan, an effective learning organization "fosters diversity while trust-

building" and "provokes anxiety and contains it." Fullan proposes that learning organizations continuously acquire new and better knowledge. Successful reforms, he adds, are largely a function of conditions under which organizations can generate and learn new ideas. Fullan speaks of operating on "the edge of chaos," meaning, for example, finding the right balance between too much and too little structure.

Fullan suggests that learning communities "consist of intricate, embedded interaction inside and outside the organization which converts tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge on an ongoing basis." EI's strategy to build communities of practice is a concrete way to foster these intricate interactions and connect the system to different parts of itself to reveal continuously what the organization knows. ■