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ORIGINAL ARTICLE



## Exploring the discursive positioning of members of a literacy professional learning community

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### ABSTRACT

Increasingly, professional learning (PL) approaches in the U.S. and globally are reflecting highly adaptive and socially constructed views of learning. However, much remains to be learned about how professional learning groups discursively develop and sustain collaborative communities. Drawing on positioning theory in this year-long qualitative study, we sought to understand how the dialogue used in a literacy teacher learning community shaped how participants engaged in PL. Results revealed that the nature of dialogue within and across social tasks during collaborative PL meetings evolved such that the teachers in the PL community assumed and enacted more agency for their professional learning across the year. Moreover, the evolving storyline of the group across the year was informed by the way discursive practices were enacted in terms of conversant's rights and duties, the social force of their conversational turns, and the evolving identities of individuals and the group. This work matters because the more we understand the characteristics of effective PL approaches, the better we can co-construct effective PL communities with teachers that promote their learning and the learning of their students.

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### KEYWORDS

Literacy professional learning communities; positioning theory; discursive processes

## Introduction

If we understand how we construct social reality, we can construct more consciously to sustain the norms that promote the ends we profess to desire. (Slocum-Bradley 2009, p. 81)

Increasingly, professional learning (PL) approaches in the U.S. and globally are reflecting highly adaptive and socially constructed views of learning (Risko and Vogt 2016). Concomitant with these views, collaborative inquiry forefronts the study of social interactions within teacher learning communities as important levers for meaningful change in teachers' practice and student achievement. Such contexts for collaborative inquiry can provide educators with a sense of ownership and sustained, active engagement in PL while also addressing tensions related to feelings of isolation in teaching (Timperley, et al., (2020), Westheimer 2008, Crafton and Kaiser 2011, Risko and Vogt 2016).

Teacher learning communities (e.g. teacher study groups, PL communities) represent a collaborative approach to PL whereby educators are encouraged to take active, reflective, learner-oriented stances to inquiry about the complexities of teaching and problems of practice (Vescio and Ross 2008, Voelkel and

Chrispeels 2017). Although the goals and outcomes for fostering effective and meaningful teacher learning within collaborative approaches to PL communities are shared by many educators and researchers, specific ways to attain these goals and outcomes in actual practice remain elusive (Bryk, 2015, Hairon *et al.* 2017). Although scholarship has revealed that learning communities can be powerful ways to promote teacher inquiry about student learning, there is much to learn about how meaningful collaborations develop and are sustained through dialogue (Bryk, 2015).

In this study, we sought to understand how the dialogue used in a literacy teacher learning community shaped how participants engaged in PL. We explored the first year of interactions of a community comprised of university researchers and a group of teachers and instructional leaders in a private not-for-profit literacy organisation (PLO) as members worked together to co-create adult professional literacy learning opportunities specific to the learning needs of the teachers and students in the PLO. We framed our analysis of participant discourse using positioning theory (e.g. McVee *et al.* 2004, 2019) as a conceptual tool to examine participants' dialogic interactions during monthly PL sessions focused on literacy teaching and learning. We explored the following question: How does the discursive positioning of members in a teacher learning community inform their engagement in learning during Year 1 of their work together?

## Background

We begin this section explaining how we use positioning theory to frame and interpret our study. Next, we contextualise our study within learning community scholarship that has focused on the essential characteristics of effective learning communities.

### Theoretical lens

Positioning theory can serve as a powerful theoretical lens to explore how meanings are produced in and through discursive practices (Davies and Harré 1990, Harré and van Langenhove 1999). Drawing on Harré and Gillett 1994, p. 28), we define a discursive practice as '... the use of a sign system, for which there are norms for right and wrong use, and the signs concern or are directed at various things.' People position themselves and others intentionally and unintentionally through their engagement in discursive practices; we label this process of positioning and being positioned through discourse as discursive positioning. By exploring discursive positioning, we can understand how individuals and groups '... create realities, invite identities, and position knowledge within social contexts' (Johnston 2004, p. 9).

Extending the work of Harré and his colleagues (e.g. Harré and van Langenhove 1999), Slocum-Bradley (2009) proposed a four-pronged approach, which she labels as a positioning diamond—adding *identities* to the *storylines*, (*sets of*) *rights and duties*, and *the social forces of discursive acts* framework—to explore how social episodes unfold across time. *Identity* is different from *position* in that *positions* include rights and duties afforded to—and enacted by—a person with respect to a unique moral order associated with a particular *position*. *Identity*, on the other hand, is a dynamic, contextually embedded discursive construct that refers to attributions of a person such as character, appearance, and group membership. Whereas we address all four components of the Slocum-Bradley's (2009) positioning diamond in our work, we foreground the development of participants' social identities constructed within the two focus groups (the PLO group and the university group) that comprised the collaborative PL team.

### Essential characteristics of effective learning communities

Research points to three common characteristics of PL contexts where teacher learning thrives. First, teacher learning is positively enhanced when PL connects directly to teachers' unique needs in their specific instructional contexts (Charner-Laird *et al.* 2016, Kohnen and Whitacre. 2017, Main

and Pendergast 2017). That is, the knowledge or skills being addressed in PL must connect to the day-to-day work that occurs in classrooms (Main and Pendergast 2017). Moreover, these situated conversations are further enhanced when the collaborative environment extends beyond the duration of PL meetings with actions items for teachers to address in their own classrooms (Charner-Laird *et al.* 2016, Kohnen and Whitacre. 2017, Main and Pendergast 2017).

Second, research also shows that high-quality learning communities are built on trust; participants are willing and able to acknowledge and use teaching vulnerabilities that result from dialogic interactions to grow (Tschannen-Moran and Hoy 2000, Dobbs *et al.* 2017). Thus, for a teacher group to become a community working towards a shared goal, there must be a certain level of vulnerability among the members (Kelly and Cherkowski 2015). There must be a willingness to hear feedback that emanates from dialogic interactions and possibly change beliefs about learning and instruction (Owen 2017). When teachers are willing to challenge their own beliefs and perspectives about student learning, they may incorporate new materials, goals, and approaches into their instruction, thus potentially improving their students' learning (Tschannen-Moran and Hoy 2000).

Third, effective learning communities pull teachers out from behind the closed doors of their classrooms, disrupting cultures of isolation, and into purposeful, thoughtful problem-solving interactions with others (Dobbs *et al.* 2016, Bugen 2017). Teachers who participate in successful learning communities can reflect on and discuss what is and is not working with respect to their classroom practices (Wardrip *et al.* 2015). Engaging in dialogue to share knowledge and problem-solve in a community is associated with the development of greater conceptual and practical understandings surrounding instruction (Snow *et al.* 2015).

Whereas we know that learning communities *can* be powerful venues for promoting teacher and student learning (e.g. Vescio and Ross 2008, Voelkel and Chrispeels 2017), some educators and organisations have struggled to implement learning communities in sustainable, efficient, and effective ways (Bryk, 2015). Moreover, given the inherent social nature of learning, Crafton and Kaiser (2011) write, 'it is the language of collaboration and dialogic processes that influence the development of learners within the community as it simultaneously shapes the identities of those who inquire within it' (p. 104). Crafton and Kaiser also add that '... the co-construction of meaning in these interactions is messy because, as we know, social interactions are filled with struggle, tensions, ambiguity, and shifting power relationships' (p. 109). Thus, understanding the discursive construction of meaning in enacting learning communities will help us, as a field, understand more about the enabling and constraining factors for nurturing effective and sustainable literacy learning communities.

## Methods

Data for this study were drawn from the first year of a multi-year partnership examining the unfolding of a PL initiative between a non-profit private literacy organisation (PLO) and literacy educators at the University of the West (pseudonym). Using a qualitative, interpretative approach (Maxwell 2013) and discourse analysis (Gee 2014), we aimed to capture the socially constructed positionings of the focus participants to glean nuanced understandings of how the PLO educators and university partners established and facilitated a culture of professional inquiry around literacy.

## Context & participants

The PLO is situated in a rural Western community that is approximately 20% LatinX and 80% white. The PLO sports a threefold approach to family engagement through literacy: afterschool interest-based tutoring conducted by volunteers; afterschool enrichment clubs focused on project-based learning; and family literacy experiences. The PLO includes a half-day preschool, adult

English-as-a-second-language classes and work-place literacy education, caregiver workshops, and home visits. During year one of our partnership, the PLO's 8 staff members worked with 106 volunteers to serve 538 students, both children and adults (60% LatinX) and 352 families.

In August 2016, the PLO/university partners sought to establish a focused trajectory and collaborative culture of literacy PL. The PLO drew on student data to select an overall literacy focus on vocabulary development during Year 1 of the study. UW then created a text set of 46 (mostly practitioner) articles on vocabulary. Each month, the PLO teachers choose the article(s) for PLO and UW participants to read and discuss. A central PL goal was for PLO teachers to select ideas from the vocabulary articles to try in their own teaching (Charner-Laird *et al.* 2016, Kohnen and Whitacre. 2017). Then, during monthly PL sessions, teachers discussed ideas from the readings, examples of trying the ideas in their classrooms, and outcomes of these efforts.

From August 2016 to June 2017, eleven PLO/university PL meetings occurred to support the teaching of PLO educators. Three face-to-face PL meetings occurred (August 2016, January 2017, and June 2017), with the researchers travelling to the PLO. The other eight meetings occurred via a videoconference platform. Unfortunately, we experienced technical difficulties with the Zoom recordings for the September and October 2017 meetings, so those meeting data were not available for analysis.

Participants (names are pseudonyms) included three PLO leaders, eight PLO educators, two AmeriCorps volunteers at the PLO, and four university researchers. Figure 1 provides an overview of PLO participants, their respective positions, their degrees, and their years of teaching experience.

The university team was comprised of Cecilia, the lead consultant and a professor and former upper elementary teacher with expertise in disciplinary literacies, literacy learning among diverse populations, and literacy PL. She led and facilitated the PLO/university work. Don is an associate professor, former elementary teacher, and literacy specialist with expertise in literacy PL and coaching, literacy intervention, and classroom discourse. He co-facilitated the Private Literacy Agency/university interactions. Veronica is a professor and former high school science teacher with expertise in disciplinary literacies, adolescent literacy, and literacy PL. She co-facilitated the Private Literacy Agency/university interactions. Adele was a doctoral student in literacy; she was a research assistant on this collaborative project.

Name	Position	Education	Years of Teaching Experience
Lisa	PLO Executive Director	M.Ed. Elementary Education	8
Kerry	PLO Afterschool Program Manager	BA in psychology	14
Frances	PLO Family Literacy Program Manager	BA in Elementary Education	10
Karen	PLO Teacher and Program Coordinator	MA in Curriculum & Instruction	15
Al	PLO Teacher and Program Coordinator	BA Education	1
Jessica	PLO Teacher and Program Coordinator	BA Italian	1
Kim	PLO Teacher and Coordinator for Preschool Program	BS Science	0
Leigh	PLO Teacher and Program Coordinator for Adult Literacy	MA Film	0
Elizabeth	PLO Americorps Intern	Pursuing BA	0
Kass	PLO Americorps Intern	Pursuing BA	0

Figure 1. PLO participants.

**Table 1.** Data sources.

Nov. 2016	Dec. 2016	Jan. 2017	Jan. 2017	March 2017	April 2017	May 2017
Video Field notes	Video Field notes	Audio Field notes	Video Field notes	Video Field notes	Video	Audio

### **Data sources and data collection and analysis procedures**

We collected nine video- and/or audio recordings (Face-to-Face [F2F] or Zoom) between August 2016 and June 2017 as well as field notes and artefacts for monthly meetings. Face-to-face and Zoom meetings were recorded. Table 1 provides an overview of data sources and dates data were collected.

Data were analysed in the following manner: First, data were catalogued monthly, and all video and audio-recordings were professionally transcribed. Simultaneously, all data sources were reviewed monthly, and analytic memos were written. Then, members of the UW research team individually conducted initial broad-brush ‘reads’ of data, engaging in open coding and noting potential themes relative to the research question.

Drawing from these initial reads, we refined our coding and coded all transcripts across the year for social-task episodes—defined as series of turns between or among participants focused on an overarching social-task being accomplished within that episode (e.g. greetings/pleasantries, reflections on participation process, etc.). To establish trustworthiness, the UW research team read all transcripts individually, making notes about social-task episodes before discussing each transcript to reach 100% consensus on coding. That is, we sought to ‘reach agreement on each code through collaborative discussion rather than independent corroboration’ (Smagorinsky 2008, p. 401). As appropriate, codes were refined and/or collapsed to represent emerging understandings about the conversations; previously coded transcripts were then re-coded.

To further unpack these interactions, we noted who initiated each social task episode across the seven focus PL sessions. As well, we coded the initiation of each social task episode for modes of positioning, drawing initially on the modes presented by Harré and van Langenhove (1999) and McVee *et al.* (2004). The positioning modes previously identified by scholars that pertained to these data included the following:

- *tacit other positioning*—conversants position others implicitly;
- *deliberate self-positioning*—conversants overtly position themselves in a conversation;
- *deliberate other positioning*—conversants overtly position others in a conversation; and
- *second order positioning*—conversants question ‘typical’ storylines.

Additionally, we identified a particular type of positioning that occurred in this data set but was not represented by a priori modes (Brock *et al.*, 2019). This mode, *deliberate self and other positioning*, refers to the unique utterances whereby the interlocutor speaks for her/himself **and** one, or both, of the broader groups of which she/he was a part. Once transcripts were coded, we met to discuss emerging ideas and corroborate interpretations across data sources.

### **Findings**

In this paper, we explore how the discursive positioning of members in a PL community informs their learning during literacy PL. The findings are structured in the following manner. First, we set the stage for the ways participants participated during PL sessions each month by (a) providing an overview of the structure and content of monthly PL sessions, (b) the educators present for each PL session, and (c) the number of conversational turns taken by participants each month. Then, we

engage in two levels of analysis exploring (a) the number and nature of social task episodes across all PL sessions throughout the year, and (b) the ways the initiator of each social task episode positioned her/himself and others to engage in the talk that occurred during each social task episode.

### ***Initial analysis: positioning the overall context***

Typical PLO/UW PL sessions occurred in the following manner. First, because UW and the PLO are separated by over 300 miles, UW sent a Zoom link to the PLO leaders each month. Second, both UW and the PLO connected via Zoom at the time the sessions were to start. PL sessions typically lasted 50 to 60 minutes. Third, PLO teachers sat in a circle around a table with a camera aimed towards the circle; UW collaborators also sat around a table in front of a screen with a camera aimed towards them. Talk ensued between members at each site and across members at the different sites.

### ***Educators present at the seven focus pl sessions***

Figure 2 provides an overview of attendance across the seven focus PL sessions. Some participants attended most sessions and some participants attended only a few sessions. Clearly, the more sessions that participants attend, the more likely that they may contribute more conversational turns.

### ***Participants' conversational turns***

An analysis of Figure 2 reveals that except for November and March, UW team members took approximately a third of the conversational turns during the PL sessions. In November, UW team members took three-fourths of the conversational turns, and in March, when only one UW team member was present, UW took 13% of the conversational turns. PLO members took approximately two-thirds of the conversational turns during most of the PL sessions – except for November when they took only a fourth of the turns and March when they took four-fifths of the conversational turns. We discuss differences between these months (i.e. Nov. & March) in later analyses.

### ***Social task episodes and positioning during Year 1 of the PL collaboration***

Having set the stage for a more in-depth analysis of the evolution of the discursive practices across Year 1 of our collaboration, we frame the remainder of our findings using two levels of analysis proposed by Slocum-Bradley (2009). First, Slocum-Bradley (2009) argues that Discourse Level 1 analysis should address narrators and the content of their discourse. Thus, in the sections that immediately follow, we present an analysis of the content of the PL sessions across Year 1 in terms of the social tasks that were accomplished across the year, as well as an analysis of the different narrators who initiated the social task episodes across the year. We weave an interpretation of the social forces of participants' discursive acts, the evolution of participants' identities, participants' rights and duties, and the evolving storyline at this level into our Discourse Level 1 discussion.

Discourse Level 2 analysis in Slocum-Bradley's (2009, p. 92) framework '... concerns what is "going on" at the level of the narrator[s] and ... (implied) interlocutor[s] or audience[s] ...'. For this analysis, we analysed the nature of positioning that occurred as participants initiated social task episodes for each session across the year of PL. Our Discourse Level 2 analysis also includes an interpretation of the social forces of participants' discursive acts, the evolution of participants' identities, participants' rights and duties, and the evolving storyline at this level.

### ***Discourse level 1 analysis: nature of social task episodes***

Figure 3 presents an overview of the nature of social tasks across the seven focus PL sessions for the first year of the PLO/UW collaboration. The 'Key' for Figure 3, illustrates the four primary social tasks that were accomplished across the year of PL. First, when participants engaged in stretches of



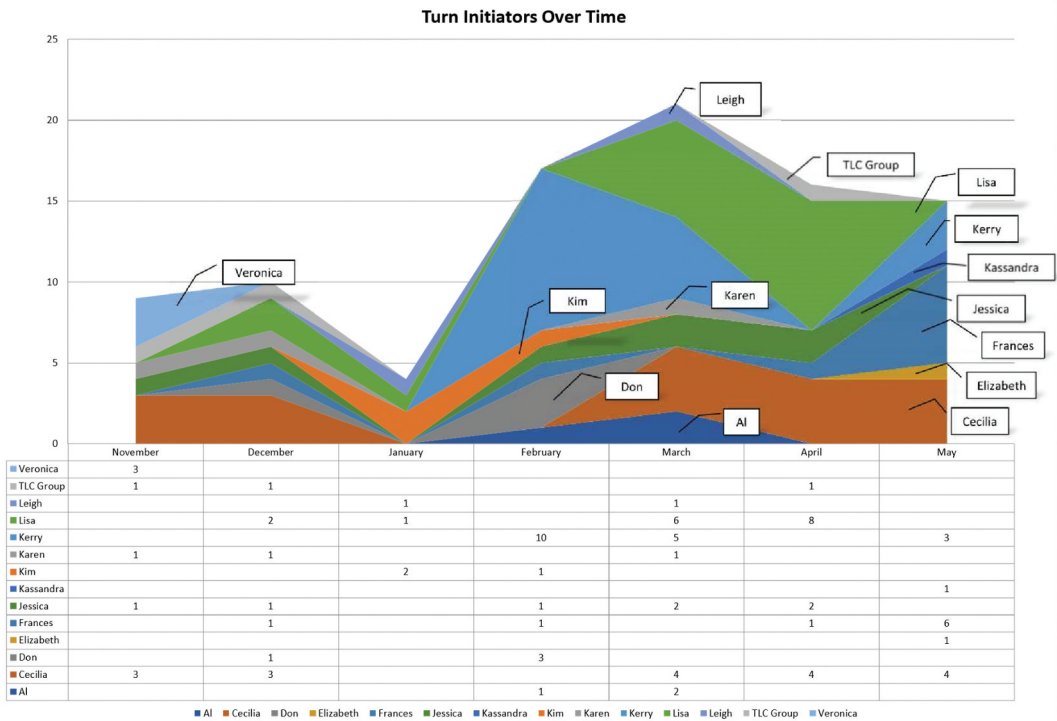
1.	Group	Name	Nov. 2016	Dec. 2016	Jan. 2017	Feb. 2017	March 2017	April 2017	May 2017	Total Turns
2.	UW	Cecilia	22	26	7	—	56	38	48	197 (33)
3.		Don	17	22	7	81	—	18	6	151 (25)
4.		Veronica	21	—	—	—	—	2	—	23 (12)
5.	Total UW:		60	48	14	81	56	58	54	
6.	% of turns		76%	38%	25%	40%	13%	35%	36%	
7.	LC	(Kim)	—	—	6	8	—	3	6	23 (6)
8.		(Lisa)	1	18	10	—	85	24	—	138 (28)
9.		(Kerry)	4	—	7	33	46	14	19	123 (21)
10.		(Karen)	6	17	10	5	9	7	1	55 (8)
11.		(Frances)	1	11	7	21	25	24	40	129 (18)
12.		(Leigh)	—	4	2	11	21	6	9	53 (9)
13.		(Al)	—	—	—	14	14	2	4	34 (9)
14.		(Jessica)	3	12	—	22	18	13	1	124 (21)
15.		? (Unknow n)	4	19	N/A	10	26	1	3	62
16.		(Elizabeth)	—	—	—	—	4	6	8	18 (6)
17.		(Kass)	—	—	—	—	18	7	4	29 (10)
18.	Total: PLO		19	81	42	124	266	107	95	
19.	% of turns		24%	62%	75%	60%	83%	65%	64%	
20.	Total PLO & UW		79	129	56	205	322	165	149	

Figure 2. Analysis of conversational turns for the 2016/2017 professional development.<sup>1</sup>

discourse that involved reporting procedural information, we labelled those social task episodes ‘Reporting Procedural’ (RP). For example, towards the beginning of the April 2017 PL session, Lisa (the PLO leader) stated the following:

So, we— this month we had a reading, a selection of readings on . . . culturally responsive instruction, and so we did discuss in our small groups about the articles we chose. We didn’t necessarily choose the same article in our groups but talked about what stuck out in that article and then how we might apply that to our goal, our teaching instruction goal that we set a couple of months ago.





**Figure 3.** Participants who initiated social task episode turns across time during Year 1.

Second, when participants engaged in periods of talk that involved discussing procedural information, we labelled those social task episodes ‘Discussing Procedural’ (DP). An example of discussing procedural information occurred towards the beginning of the PL session in March of 2017 when Cecilia stated:

... And can I ask one other quick favour. We’re gonna have a new transcriptionist helping us with the transcripts moving forward, so could we take just a couple of minutes at the beginning to get like a face shot, the person saying her or his name and the person adding a few sentences, so that the new transcriptionist can match the face to the voice to the person’s sound when she’s transcribing?

Third, excerpts of talk that involved reporting conceptual information were labelled ‘Reporting Conceptual’(RC). In March of 2017, for example, Leigh reported to the PL group various conceptual ideas that she had been trying with her students, stating: ‘One of my goals has been working with Jessica towards building background knowledge but also creating an ESL curriculum map ... I’ve been able to use ... an ESL journal that I gave them and have them write things that have to do about their own life ...’ In this example, Leigh continued speaking for several minutes, reporting additional instructional ideas she had been trying with her students. Leigh positions herself as someone with useful information to share with the members to promote learning although the group did not engage in any discussion about these ideas, nor did Leigh pose any questions or concerns to the group to promote discussion.

Finally, we labelled stretches of the talk focused on discussing conceptual issues pertaining to literacy teaching and learning as ‘Discussing Conceptual’ (DC). In December of 2016, Frances provides an example of a segment of talk that focuses on discussing conceptual issues when she says, ‘I have a question ... We are trying to teach our preschoolers to ask questions, and I’m running out of good ideas ...’ Frances then mentions several ideas she has tried in her instruction and then states, ‘ ... I just don’t know how to make that [getting preschoolers to

ask good questions] happen . . . .’ Next, Don as well as other members of the learning community pose questions and suggestions to Frances as the group explores ideas for ways to support Frances in her instructional goals. This example shows how members engage in discursive positioning of themselves and one another as knowledgeable colleagues who can explore and offer suggestions to Frances.

Figure 3 overviews the nature of social task episodes and the individuals who initiated them across the year. Virtually all the social task episodes that focused on DC (discussing conceptually) happened during the second half of the year from January through May. Exceptions include social task episodes initiated by Veronica, Don, and Frances who were all leaders either at UW or the PLO. All of the DC examples in the second half of the year were led by participants (both teachers and leaders) from the PLO. (See the pink highlighted examples labelled DC in the black highlighted box in Figure 3, lines 5–12.) Social task episodes centred around conceptual discussions are noteworthy because conceptual discussions about instructional practices *should* be the cornerstone of PL (Voelkel and Chrispeels 2017).

We infer that PLO participants began initiating conceptual discussions (i.e. the DC code) about their teaching the second half of the year after they became more comfortable with the UW collaborators, one another, and the process of examining their instructional practices in PL sessions. As revealed by the pink highlighted ‘DCs’ in lines 5, 6, 7, 9, 11 and 12 of Figure 3, six of the ten educators/leaders at the PLO led social task episodes about conceptual discussions of their instruction during the second half of the year. In short, we argue that PLO teachers’ rights and duties shifted from the beginning of the year to the second half of the year. Rights and duties are enacted in social contexts, and the enactment of rights and duties involves the interpretation of contextual norms; clearly, then, understanding the enactment of rights and duties is imperative for examining the unfolding of social episodes (Slocum-Bradley 2009).

A central component of the PL during Year 1 of this project was to construct a discursive space between the PLO and UW whereby it was considered ‘normal’ to interrogate one’s teaching. Whereas it could be argued that at least one PLO teacher entered into PL with this set of assumed rights and duties already in place (witness, for example, the fact that Frances engaged in some discussing of conceptual instructional ideas earlier in the year than other PLO educators – December 2016), Figure 3 reveals that it took the better part of the first half of the year for most other PLO educators to begin to engage in the discursive space such that they saw it as both their right and duty to openly interrogate their teaching practices and their students’ learning.

Just as individuals’ enactment of rights and duties can shift across time, so, too, can their identities as educators. Identities are fluid and dynamic, including ‘ . . . two components: a definition of “who” the actor is, as well as characteristics attributed to the actor’ (Slocum-Bradley 2009, p. 95). Figure 3 reveals that as the nature of interactions shifted and changed across the year, the teachers’ public identities during the PL also shifted. That is, whereas most of the PLO teachers were silent in PL sessions during the first half of the year, they assumed a more openly agentic stance to their work during the second half of the year; through the nature of their conversational turns, they demonstrated a willingness to engage in public discussion and critique of their instruction.

Exceptions included Elizabeth and Kass, who were temporary AmeriCorps volunteers only at the PLO for a short period of time as well as Leigh and Karen. Recall that Leigh had just recently joined the PLO; she did not have a background in education, and she had not been a teacher; consequently, she was in the very early stages of learning to teach, and it may have been intimidating to discuss/critique her teaching practices in the group. Karen, on the other hand, had a background in education and had been at the PLO for six years; thus, it was surprising that she did not initiate any conceptual discussions pertaining to her teaching. It is plausible that Elizabeth, Kass, and Leigh felt that their backgrounds would not carry the same social force as those who had worked at the PLO for a longer period of time and had considerably more experience as teachers.

Whereas Karen, Leigh, and the two AmeriCorps volunteers (i.e. Kass and Elizabeth) did not initiate conceptual discussions of their teaching practices, they did initiate social task episodes that featured reports on their uptake of conceptual ideas in their teaching (i.e. see RC – reporting conceptually – highlighted in turquoise on lines 8, 10, 13, and 14 of [Figure 3](#)). Recall that RC social task episodes focus on reporting conceptual information/ideas. In December, Karen (line 8, [Figure 3](#)) reported on some of her conceptual understandings from one of the readings, and in March, Karen reported on some of her instructional practices and goals. In January, Leigh reported on learning activities she had been trying in her instruction, and in March, Leigh reported on her instructional practices. In May, Kass and Elizabeth (the two AmeriCorps volunteers) reported on instructional practices they had been trying in their teaching. Kass and Elizabeth had only been to two PL sessions prior to this conceptual reporting out. Thus, even the four participants who did not engage in the more rigorous DC (i.e. conceptual discussions) demonstrated positive movement in their identities as teachers who are learning to engage in self-reflection and self-critique.

Although RC (i.e. conceptual reporting) social task episodes are arguably not as conceptually rigorous as DC (i.e. conceptual discussing) social task episodes because they involve reporting rather than discussing, they are still noteworthy because they do involve participants thinking about—and sharing publicly—their perceptions of their instructional practices. A close examination of the black-highlighted box (lines 5–14) in [Figure 3](#) reveals that all PLO participants initiated social task episodes that were either conceptual discussions (DC) and/or conceptual reports (RC) of their teaching during the second half of the year from January through May of 2017. This matters because it illustrates that all the PLO participants (including the leaders and the teachers) are openly thinking and talking about their teaching practices during the monthly PL sessions.

Lisa, Kerry, and Frances (PLO leaders) all lead conceptual discussions and/or conceptual reports of their teaching. This is important because leaders at the PLO are also teachers; consequently, they are reflecting on and discussing their own teaching. Second, the PLO leaders are modelling for the PLO teachers the importance of critically reflecting on their own teaching. Given that the social force of the turns taken by PLO leaders could be greater than the social force of subordinates in the organisation, the fact that PLO leaders were willing to be critiqued may have prompted PLO teachers to do the same.

The final two social task episode codes in [Figure 3](#) include procedural reporting (RP) and procedural discussing (DP). Recall that procedural reporting (RP) occurred when, for example, Cecilia asked all PLO participants to share their names at the beginning of sessions so that the transcriptionist could attach names to participants' utterances for each session. Procedural discussing (DP) occurred when, for example, leaders at UW and the PLO problem-solved the next steps for professional collaboration. A close look at lines one through three of [Figure 3](#) reveals that most of the social task initiations for Cecilia, Don, and Veronica were either DP or RP. Line 2 of [Figure 2](#) reveals that Cecilia starts every session with a procedural discussion (DP) except January 2017, when she and Don are at the PLO in person. Because Cecilia was the lead UW person on this PL project, she sent a Zoom link to the PLO leaders prior to each PL session. The first social task episode of each Zoom PL session, then, involved Cecilia leading a procedural discussion about connecting through technology, making sure that the volume was appropriate for both UW and PLO partners, etc. We infer here that because Cecilia was the lead UW researcher on the project that she took it as her duty to organise and begin monthly PL sessions.

A close examination of lines six, seven, and nine in [Figure 3](#) also reveals that most of the DP and RP codes for PLO participants belonged to the PLO leaders: Lisa, Kerry, and Frances. It makes sense that the leaders at both UW and the PLO saw it as their duty to initiate procedure-related reports and discussions since they were responsible for both the monthly and long-term organisation of the collaboration. It also makes sense that PLO leaders, Lisa, Kerry, and Frances, had considerable turns reporting (i.e. RC) and discussing (i.e. DC) conceptual issues since they were leaders as well as teachers at the PLO who were critiquing their instructional practices.

### *Discourse level 1 analysis: initiators of social task episodes*

Whereas Figure 3 reveals the nature of social task episodes across the seven focus PL sessions, Figure 4 provides an overview of the participants who initiated each social task episode each month. The horizontal axis (i.e. the X-axis) of Figure 4 portrays each month of Year 1. The vertical axis (i.e. the Y-axis) shows the number of initiations of social task episodes by individual either at the PLO or UW. Each person is represented by a different colour in Figure 4. Finally, the bottom portion of Figure 4 depicts the number of times different individuals initiated social task episodes across the year.

Figure 4 reveals that (a) more social task episodes occur during the second half of the year, and (b) a wider variety of individuals across the PLO and UW initiated the social task episodes in the second half of the year. The most predominant colours represented during the first half of the year in November and December are Veronica (light blue – UW leader), Lisa (light green – PLO leader), and Cecilia (burnt orange – UW leader). Thus, the data for Figure 4 reveal that not only were there fewer social task episodes initiated during the first half of the year, but fewer people also – and mostly UW or PLO leaders – initiated the social task episodes.

Figure 4 reveals a significant shift in the nature and number of social task episodes initiated during the second half of the year from February 2017 to May 2017. The UW and the PLO leaders still initiated the most social task episodes. During the second half of the year, however, PLO leaders initiated more social task episodes than UW leaders; see the light green (Lisa – PLO leader), light blue (Kerry – PLO leader), and dark blue (Frances – PLO leader). Notice, too, that everyone – including the PLO teachers – initiated social task episodes during the second half of the year.

These data – considered together with Figure 3 data – reveal a shift in the storyline of the overall PL collaboration with respect to the narrators and the content of their discourse. In short, the data reveal that more participants in the learning community are engaged in PL conversations, and the conceptual content of their discussions is more conceptually rigorous during the second half of the year. Discourse Level 1 analysis addresses the ‘who’ and ‘what’ of the evolving discursive space. Discourse Level 2 analysis, which we turn to now, focuses more on ‘how’ participants shifted the evolving storyline in their collaborative community.

**Discourse Level 2 Analysis: Positioning Analysis of Initiations of Social Task Episodes.** Figure 5 represents the nature of positioning that occurred during the initiation of each social task episode across the PL sessions for the year and helps to shed light on ‘how’ interlocutors interacted with one another to shift the nature of the storyline across the year. First, with respect to the UW leaders (lines two through four of Figure 5), notice that typically Cecilia initiated three or more topic-centred episodes each PL session across the year. Also, note that Cecilia primarily engaged in deliberate other positioning (i.e. DOP), which occurs when conversants deliberately position others in a conversation. Line 2 of Figure 5 reveals that Cecilia initiated 12 DOP topic centred episodes. The social task episode initiated by Cecilia below occurred towards the end of the November 2016 PL session. The excerpt below represents how Cecilia deliberately positioned the group to contemplate how things were going with the ongoing PL talk/work.

Cecilia: Ok. Well, it ... looks like, sounds like most people have something you want to try between now and the next meeting. You know some idea or ideas. Is that right? Did we hear that right?

Don: And they're not small things ... These are big ideas talking with parents, listening to students ...

Lisa: And maybe when we get together tomorrow, we can talk a little bit about our next session we, because there were a lot of articles in this group and we had to narrow it down to three. So, it might be worth us looking at that again since some of them revolved around that which language to incorporate in the classroom ... But we can talk more tomorrow.

1.	Group	Name	Nov. 2016	Dec. 2016	Jan. 2017	Feb. 2017	March 2017	April 2017	May 2017	Total Social Task Episodes Led
2.	UW	Cecilia	DP RC DP	DP RC DP	0	–	DP DP DP DP	DP RP RP DP	DP	15
3.		Don		DC	0	RP DP DP	–	0	0	4
4.		Veronica	DP DC	–	–	–	–	0	–	2
5.	PLO	(Kim)	–	–	DC DC	DC	–	0	0	3
6.		(Lisa)	0	RP RC	DP	–	DC RP DP DC DP DP	RP RC RC DC RC RC DP DP	–	17
7.		(Kerry)	0	–	0	RP RC DC DP RC DP DP RP DP	RC DP DP DC DC	0	RP RC RP	17
8.		(Karen)	RP	RC	0	0	RC	0	0	3
9.		(Frances)	0	DC	0	DP	0	DC	DP RP DP RP DC DP	9
10.		(Leigh)	–	0	RC	0	RC	0	0	2
11.		(Al)	–	–	–	DP DC	DC	0	0	3
12.		(Jessica)	RC	DP	–	DC	DC DC	DC RC	0	7
13.		(Elizabeth )	–	–	–	–	0	0	RC	1
14.		(Kass)	–	–	–	–	0	0	RC	1

**Figure 4.** Nature of social tasks across the seven focus PD sessions. RP = Reporting Procedural DP = Discussing Procedural RC = Reporting Conceptual DC = Discussing Conceptual

As the UW leader with primary responsibility for organising the PL, Cecilia likely considered it her duty to deliberately position the group to (a) reflect on and (b) organise next steps in the ongoing PL work. Line 2 of [Figure 5](#) reveals that Cecilia maintained this role across all the PL sessions for Year 1. Notice, also, in lines 6, 7, and 9 of [Figure 5](#) that the PLO leaders (Lisa, Kerry, &

1.	Group	Name	Nov. 2016	Dec. 2016	Jan. 2017	Feb. 2017	March 2017	April 2017	May 2017	Total Social Task Episo des Led
2.	UW	Cecilia	DOP DOP	DOP DSP DSP	0	–	DOP DOP DOP DOP	DOP DOP DOP DOP	DSO P DOP DSO P	15
3.		Don		DSO P	0	DSO P DOP DSO P	–	0	0	4
4.		Veronica	DSOP DSOP DOP	–	–	–	–		–	2
5.	PLO	(Kim)	–	–	DSP SOP	DSP	–	0	0	3
6.		(Lisa)		DSO P DSO P	SOP	–	DSOP DOP DSOP DSOP DSOP DSOP	DSO P DSO P DSO P DOP DSO P DOP	–	17
7.		(Kerry)	0	–	0	DSO P DSP DSO P DOP DOP DSO P DSO P DSO P	DSOP DOP DSOP DOP DSOP	0	DOP DOP DOP	17
8.		(Karen)	DSOP	DSO P	0	0	DSOP	0	0	3
9.		(Frances)	0	SOP	0	DSO P	0	SOP	DOP DSP DSO P DOP	9

Figure 5. Positioning as social task episodes were initiated.

Frances, respectively) took a greater role in asking the group to reflect on and organise the next steps in the second half of the year. In fact, during the second half of the year from February to May, the PLO leaders initiate two- to three times as many social task episodes as the UW leaders. (See the yellow and turquoise highlighting in [Figure 5](#).) Thus, we argue that these data reveal a shift in traditional ‘top-down’ university leadership to more distributed leadership across the year whereby the PLO leaders saw it as their right and duty to play a greater role in shaping the discourse that occurred in PL the second half of the year.

A closer examination of the placement of the initiation of social task episodes during each PL session reveals that the UW leaders often open and close the PL sessions. This makes sense since the UW leaders are the ones who sent the Zoom link to the PLO leaders. During the second half of the year, however, the PLO leaders initiate most of the social task episodes after the UW leaders open the PL sessions. For example, in the excerpt below during February, Kerry (a PLO leader) initiates a social task episode that involves a conceptual discussion around problem-solving instructional practices.

Kerry: Anybody else? As we were all sharing our goals, some of the common themes that came out were kind of retention of vocabulary and retention of knowledge past like retelling the story the same day and being able to bring – talk about that in the upcoming weeks. Building background knowledge. And then another thing that came up as we were all talking was that some of the specific students we have in mind. Leigh’s thinking about the mom and Al’s thinking about the son- the daughter and the little son is actually in preschool. And with some of our specific students that we’re thinking of, all within the same like oh, they’re not really remembering what we talk about from week to week and they’re not retaining these bigger background knowledge pieces . . .

Thus, we argue that as lines 6, 7, and 9 of [Figure 5](#) reveal, and as demonstrated by Kerry’s excerpt above, during the PL sessions the second half of the year, the PLO leaders primarily led the discussions regarding the critique and evaluation of teachers’ instruction. The UW leaders assume a secondary support role in these PL interactions.

Kerry’s excerpt above points to another important trend in the PL conversations across the year. We labelled Kerry’s initiation of a social task episode above as DSOP (Deliberate Self and Other Positioning). DSOP occurs when the interlocutor speaks for her/himself **and** one, or both, of the broader groups (i.e. the PLO team or the PLO/UW team) of which she/he is a part. In the excerpt above, Kerry is speaking for herself and different PLO teachers as she provides a summary of their thoughts and ideas. An analysis of the times that conversants initiate DSOP social task episodes in [Figure 5](#) reveals that 10 such episodes are initiated in the first half of the year, and 28 such episodes are initiated in the second half of the year. This is noteworthy; when conversants feel that they can speak for themselves **and** the group(s) of which they are a part, it can signify cohesiveness and the development of a group identity because conversants indicate a shift in the social force of their conversational turns. That is, they indicate that they have the ‘right’ to speak not only for themselves, but also for the group(s) of which they are a part. Not only do individuals assume the right to speak for their respective groups (i.e. the PLO **or** UW), but as the year progresses, group members across the two groups (i.e. the PLO and UW) begin to assume the right to speak for the entire PLO/UW group as illustrated in the talk below from near the beginning of the PL session in April.



Lisa: All right. So, **we'll** dive in.

[silence]

Kerry: I can start [laughter] . . . So, Elsa and I were in a group and our main kind of topic, we've been just talking a lot about the language we're using . . . I read . . . *Guiding English Language Learners Through the Conversation About Text* . . . and I really loved this article. And one of my favourite pieces from it was that it broke down three things that the teacher was trying to do in the conversations with the student . . .

In this excerpt, Lisa's use of 'we'll' refers to the entire PLO/UW group. After initial opening greetings, Lisa assumed the right to initiate the conceptual part of the PL session for the whole PLO/UW group. As the year progressed, we saw more instances like this excerpt whereby members of either the PLO or UW assumed the right to speak for the entire PLO/UW group. We interpret this discursive shift as an important shift in the identity and the evolving storyline of the PLO/UW group. That is, rather than two separate groups working together, towards the end of Year 1, a more united group identity began to emerge as one PLO/UW group. Moreover, the storyline shifted across the year to reveal PL as a co-constructed enterprise rather than one dominated by the university.

## Discussion

We began this paper with a quote by Slocum-Bradley (2009) whereby she argued that we, as individuals and group members, can play a central role in designing the social realities of which we are a part – especially if we analyse and critique the discursive norms enacted in social encounters. We have borrowed and adapted, Slocum-Bradley's (2009) positioning diamond scheme to do just that. In short, we analysed the PL discourse across a year, drawing on two levels of analysis. Discourse Level 1 analysis focused on the 'what' and 'who' of the discourse. Here we presented an analysis of (a) the nature of social task episodes across the year of PL (as depicted in Figure 2) and (b) who initiated these social task episodes across the year (as depicted in Figure 3). Discourse Level 2 analysis focused on the 'how' of the enactment of the discourse (as depicted in Figure 5). Here we analysed the nature of positioning across the year that shaped the evolution of the discourse. Within and across these two levels of analysis, we examined conversant's rights and duties, the social force of their conversational turns, the evolving identities of both individuals and groups, and the evolving storyline across the year.

We frame our comments in the remainder of this section around two central concerns that informed the discursive positioning of members of PL collaborative. First, what might we (at UW) have done differently to develop distributed leadership across UW and the PLO sooner, and why might doing so matter? Results reveal that UW assumed the primary role in orchestrating the PL work during the first half of the year. It wasn't until the second half of the year that PLO leaders assumed a more substantial role in co-leading the PL. Whereas we (at UW) discussed with the PLO leaders the fact that we wanted to work with them to co-construct the PL, we suspect now that we were not clear enough from the very beginning about (a) what that might look like and (b) why that might matter. We should have been clearer about what co-constructing and co-leading PL might look like by sharing explicit examples of distributed leadership. Then, we could have devoted some of our initial PLO/UW leadership meeting time to developing a vision for distributed leadership. In short, we could have been much more intentional in co-constructing distributed leadership earlier in our collaboration.

We could have also been much clearer, early on, that co-leading the PL matters because the PLO leaders are the experts relative to their own context. Quality literacy instruction involves knowledge about research based best practices in literacy, but it also requires context-specific knowledge so that research-based practices are enacted in meaningful ways in unique contexts (Morrow and Gambrell 2019). Whereas there is much we can bring to the table with respect to research-based practices in literacy, there is much we at UW did not (and do not) know about the unique context and needs of PLO teachers and students.

Our second central concern follows: What might we, at UW, have done differently to move more teachers into deeper conceptual analysis and critique of their teaching, and how might we have done so sooner? Results revealed that whereas PLO leaders and university researchers sought to work with teachers to co-construct meaningful PL that involved analysis and critique of their literacy instruction and their students' literacy learning, data from this study reveal that teachers' conceptual sharing and discussing did not really occur until the second half of the year. Moreover, [Figure 3](#) revealed that not all teachers engaged in this public self-evaluation/self-critique of their teaching. As well, even some of the teachers who did engage in this reflective work did not do so as frequently as we might have hoped.

We suspect that several factors may have precluded teachers from engaging in deeper self-reflection/self-critique sooner. First, whereas university scholars are increasingly shifting PL practices such that they co-construct PL with teachers, instructional leaders, and administrators, more traditional top-down and hierarchical PL is still prevalent, and it is likely that many teachers have pre-conceived notions of PL as the traditional kind (Timperley, et al., (2020), Risko and Vogt 2016). Thus, it may take time, and more explicit discussion, to help teachers realise when they are invited to have a hand in shaping the way PL is enacted in their unique contexts. Second, it often takes time to develop trust in PL relationships (Kohnen and Whitacre. 2017).

These two concerns notwithstanding, our close analysis of discourse across the year leads us to steps we might have taken to promote more in-depth reflection and critique on teaching practices sooner. First, PLO leaders did begin to engage in the self-reflection, self-critique process relative to their own teaching during the second half of the year, and this served as a model for the PLO teachers. We wonder what might have happened if we had suggested during our monthly leadership team meetings that PLO leaders begin to model this self-reflection, self-critique sooner in the year. Moreover, what if UW leaders had modelled this self-reflection, self-critique, too? It is worth noting that the UW leaders did not demonstrate vulnerability by critiquing their own teaching. This practice may have helped to build rapport and trust sooner in the PL process. Additionally, what if, during monthly leadership team meetings, we (at UW) had encouraged PLO leaders to coach teachers in advance of PL meetings to share, discuss, and critique their instructional practices?

According to Hairon *et al.* (2017), there is a 'lack of theorization on the conditions and contexts ... which enable and constrain [teacher community] practices' (p. 73). The work we have reported here is grounded in an analysis of participants' discursive positioning in the yearlong PL community (McVee *et al.* 2019). This discursive positioning analysis was a crucial tool for understanding (a) how and what meanings were made in the PL community across the year and (b) how our knowledge about those meanings might enable us to nurture more effective and sustainable learning communities in future PL endeavours. As Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) note, the analysis of collaborative inquiries such as ours can help to build the 'professional capital' necessary for transformative learning – of instructional leaders, administrators, university educators, teachers, and students – to occur.

## Note

### 1. Coding Notes for [Figure 2](#):

The use of – means absent.

The use of *non-applicable* (N/A) means there were no such occurrences/conversational turns.

Column 15 refers to times that speakers couldn't be identified during sessions. There was one camera at the PLC that couldn't always capture the images of everyone around the table. That coupled with the sometimes quite voices of participants made it difficult to always identify the conversant speaking.

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