

## LEADING AND FACILITATING EDUCATIONAL CHANGE THROUGH ACTION RESEARCH LEARNING COMMUNITIES

*Craig A. Mertler, Ph.D.  
Arizona State University*

### Abstract

This paper reviews the concepts of action research and professional learning communities and their applications in schools, and then discusses the idea of merging the two concepts into *action research learning communities*. Action research learning communities are professional learning communities comprised of educators and administrators, where action research serves as the “umbrella” mechanism that drives a faculty and staff toward its common mission and vision, and also serves as the common thread for the foundation of collaborative teamwork and professional growth. Roles for teachers, building-level administrators, and district-level administrators within action research learning communities are discussed. Finally, ideas for using these specific learning communities to deepen professional learning and improve student learning are presented.

## INTRODUCTION

The climate that many PK-12 schools find themselves in today has resulted in professional educators assuming roles that have the potential to lead to innovations and widespread school improvement. In the past, these kinds of responsibilities typically fell on the shoulders of district- or building-level administrators. However, substantially more teachers, administrators, and support personnel have begun to assume responsibilities for developing and implementing innovative solutions to local problems, for mentoring and providing support to colleagues, and for envisioning and leading changes to the status quo in our schools.

Some of these endeavors have been somewhat “reactive,” in that professional educators have been pressed into these roles in response to federal or state mandates, or for a multitude of other reasons. Certainly, no one would fault educators for stepping into these vitally important roles, but it is equally important that the educational community at large also consider ways to engage in various prominent roles designed to make schools better in a more proactive manner. In this article, the concept of *action research learning communities* will be presented as a viable avenue for leading and facilitating educational change.

### ***Merging Action Research & Professional Learning Communities***

Action research and professional learning communities are educational practices that have gained a great deal of momentum in our schools and districts over the past two decades. Some might see these as isolated concepts — ones that do not necessitate side-by-side implementation. Furthermore, *action research* might be an unfamiliar concept to some educators. For those who possess knowledge about the practice, it might be understood that action research allows practitioners to conduct educational research in schools. However, others might not consider action research to be a part of their jobs, and therefore, may have no interest in the practice.

A similar set of concerns exist with the concept of *professional learning communities*. Many educators believe that they are engaging in a professional learning community when they meet every Tuesday morning for an hour to discuss a common topic. While others may have a deeper understanding of professional learning communities, there is still a common misconception that such communities require the investment of an excessive amount of time, with the costs outweighing the benefits. Unfortunately, many educators who possess such beliefs do not view the professional learning community as a crucial element of their jobs.

Many educators do know that action research, as well as professional learning communities, hold high potential in making improvements within our schools. Beyond this, it is crucial to consider the potential impact of *merging* the concepts of action research and professional learning communities. If each of these possess great individual potential, it would stand to reason that by merging this set of practices, exponential benefits would emerge.

Action research and professional learning communities share many key foundational aspects, and therefore, finding a way to merge them into a single entity makes perfect sense. This merging into a single entity — a concept that I have coined as *action research learning communities* — holds an immense amount of power and potential when it comes to enhancing professional growth and development for educators, increasing student achievement, and creating school improvement. Action research learning communities, or *ARLCs*, capitalize on the individualized benefits and strengths of action research and professional learning

communities, and merge them into a single educational concept and practice. ARLCs have the potential to help educators experience the following:

- a common and collective focus and vision
- sustained collaborative inquiry
- individualized, customizable, and meaningful professional growth
- true empowerment through collaborative, inquiry-based, and reflective practice

Lets take a moment to highlight some of the key characteristics of both action research and professional learning communities.

### ***Action Research***

The term “research” itself typically makes many people, especially educators, somewhat uncomfortable. They often equate it with endeavors more “scientific” in nature (e.g., people in white lab coats with beakers and test tubes or perhaps lab animals); or, they may have flashbacks to graduate courses in research methodology and/or statistical analysis. While there may be some degree of accuracy in each of those mental interpretations and connotations, research can provide us with a systematic mechanism for collecting meaningful student data, and then using the data as the basis for well-informed educational decision-making. After all, data-driven educational decision-making has become a primary focal point for the work that we collectively do as professional educators. This is true for the early childhood educator, middle school administrator, and college/university professor. Therefore, educational decision-making is no longer reliant upon “instinct and reaction”; it now has a basis in hard data, gathered primarily from those whom we are charged to educate.

While there are numerous similarities between traditional educational research and action research, there is one crucial difference. Action research *is* educational research; however, more specifically, it is research that is conducted by educators for themselves (Mertler, 2014). Individuals who are, at least to some degree, removed from the situation and setting that they are investigating often conduct traditional educational research. University professors or graduate research assistants may conduct more traditional forms of research in our schools. In contrast, action research is conducted by individuals who play an active role as practitioners and who have a vested interest in the educational setting. Johnson (2008) described action research as being a systematic form of inquiry into one’s *own* practice.

There are five broad ways in which action research can be successfully integrated into educational settings (Mertler, 2014). Action research can be used to:

- 1) *Connect theory to practice* — Action research is conducted firsthand by practicing educators.
- 2) *Improve educational practice* — A main focus of action research is the improvement of classroom practice, through professional reflection and critical examination of one’s own work.
- 3) *Foster broad school improvement* — Action research can also be facilitated so that it promotes widespread types of improvements, in addition to improvements at the individual classroom level.

- 4) *Empower educators and engage them intellectually* — Action research is very effective at advancing the notion of *educator empowerment*, allowing professional educators to utilize their own unique sets of expertise, talents, and creativity so that they can implement instructional programs that will best meet the needs of their students.
- 5) *Cultivate professional growth* — Action research provides educators with opportunities to focus professional growth on specific professional areas that an individual or group of educators identifies as being an area in need of improvement. It is the *epitome* of customizable and meaningful professional development for educators (Mertler, 2013).

It is important to note that action research is often designed, implemented, and conducted in a collaborative manner. There are several key characteristics of *collaborative action research* (Clauzet, Lick, & Murphy, 2008, p. 2):

- Collaborative action research consists of practitioners working together as a team.
- The team focuses on a common issue, problem, or goal.
- Synergy develops, which inspires the team.
- Momentum develops, which provides insight into the problem, along with greater learning and growth relative to the common issue being examined by the team.

### ***Professional Learning Communities***

DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker (2008) have argued in favor of collaborative work that results from various members of schools and districts functioning as a professional learning community (PLC). They have defined a *professional learning community* as:

...educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. Professional learning communities operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous, job-embedded learning for educators. (DuFour et al., 2008, p. 14)

Notice that PLCs require a *commitment* on the part of educators. Additionally, there is a focus on *professional collaboration*, not only in general, but also as it relates to *ongoing collective inquiry and action research*. Also, notice that the ultimate focus of the work of a PLC is on the *achievement of better results for the students* served by these educators. Finally, a key to improved student learning is *job-embedded professional learning for educators*. These key features also represent earlier work by Hord (1997), who stated that the goal of the actions of a professional community of learners is to enhance their effectiveness as professionals for the students' benefit.

It is crucial to note that a PLC is not something you do for an hour a week. It is more than simply sitting in the faculty lounge and having a conversation about an educational topic. It is much more about a way of professional life, about the way you approach and do the job of being a professional educator, every minute of every day throughout the year. This is the primary

reason that the notion of a *collective commitment* on the part of educators is so vital to the success and effectiveness of any school's PLC. When educators commit to collaborative professional learning, it not only fosters professional learning in a community-type environment, but also becomes an integral part of their daily professional lives.

DuFour et al. (2008) discussed six characteristics, critical for the successful development and implementation of PLCs. These characteristics include:

- A shared mission, vision, values, and goals
- A collaborative culture with a focus on learning
- Collective inquiry into best practices and current reality
- An action orientation (or, learning by doing)
- A commitment to continuous improvement
- An orientation focused on results.

When considering these points, the parallels between the concepts of collaborative action research and professional learning communities become evident.

### ***Merging the Two Concepts***

An action research learning community (ARLC) takes all that is professionally beneficial from action research and combines it with the benefits of a professional learning community. An ARLC is a PLC; however, the driving force behind an ARLC is the over-arching focus on action research - the "umbrella" mechanism that drives a faculty and staff to its common mission and vision, and the common thread that provides the foundation for collaborative teamwork and professional growth. One of the benefits of this model is that it provides a common, collaborative focus (i.e., implementing an action research approach to improvement), while still permitting individual educators, or collaborative groups of educators, to specify their own context, focus, and/or goals for their use of action research. The only real difference between an ARLC and a "typical" PLC is that the focus, mindset, and culture are all based in and are created around collaborative action research in schools. In other words, the commonality shared by all participants in the ARLC is the engagement in collaborative action research for the purposes of improving practice, and ultimately, increasing student learning. A diagram of an action research learning community is shown in Figure 1.

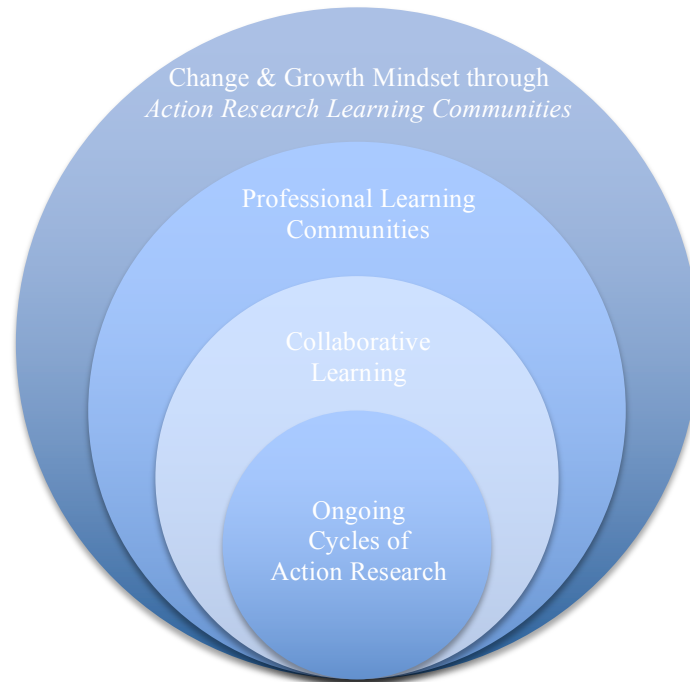


Figure 1. Structure and design of an action research learning community, showing the relationships between ongoing cycles of action research, collaborative learning, and professional learning communities, all embedded within the ARLC.

As depicted in Figure 1, the core of an ARLC is comprised of comprehensive, sustained cycles of action research that provide the common ground for the foundation of any action research learning community in an organization (e.g., school or district). All members of the organization contribute to the design, implementation, and conduct of action research. The flexibility allows for customization in order to meet and/or address specific, local, and personalized problems of practice. While the cycles of action research can certainly be conducted by individuals within the organization, they are most often conducted by smaller, collaborative groups of professional educators. This, in turn, creates an environment that supports professional and collaborative learning amongst all members of the group/team. Ultimately, collaboration is a key component in the collective success of an action research learning community.

However, collaboration, in and of itself, is not sufficient for the overall success of an action research learning community. This collaborative work must be embedded within the notion of professional learning communities, where collaboration is but one key ingredient. The notion of a PLC takes the concept of collaboration and enhances it through the development of a shared mission, vision, values, and goals, collective inquiry into best practices, and a commitment to continuous improvement. There is a fine line, but a great difference, between professional collaboration and a professional learning community. Educators may “collaborate” frequently, but they often do so without committing to common missions, visions, and goals. Finally, the collective concepts of ongoing cycles of action research, collaboration among

professional educators, and a true professional learning community are further embedded with the over-arching ideas of educational change and a growth mindset as fostered by an action research learning community. This is a true professional learning community, based on collaboration, sustained inquiry (in the form of persistent cycles of action research) into one's own professional practice, and the development of common values and goals.

### ***Roles Within Action Research Learning Communities***

Within an ARLC, there are particular roles and responsibilities that should be specified and/or openly negotiated. Teachers, building-level administrators, and district administrators each have a responsibility in the process.

#### ***Roles for Teachers in ARLCs***

Designing and developing a culture appropriate for an ARLC requires educators to embrace reflective practice. It requires a re-examination of long-held professional belief systems. It necessitates a hard look at the various roles traditionally held by teachers and those by students. There may be some apprehension, particular barriers, and perhaps even some failures along the way. Journeys of this magnitude require a commitment by courageous professional educators who are not afraid to step outside their comfort zones; those who are willing to critically examine their own practices, and are also willing to make and learn from their mistakes.

In an action research learning community, planning/collaboration time and professional development is not crammed into thirty to sixty minute increments at the beginning or end of the day. The commitment requires an "all day, every day" attitude toward professional growth, development, and learning. The ARLC mentality should be integrated into everyday practice; it should become indicative of how teachers do their jobs on a daily basis. This becomes a fabulous opportunity for teachers to focus their attention, in a collaborative manner, on reinvesting in a profession where everyone:

- recognizes professional limitations
- works collaboratively to expand possibilities and potentialities
- makes the lives of students and families more productive and successful.

#### ***Roles for Building Administrators in ARLCs***

As with any PLC, principals and assistant principals in an ARLC take on key roles in terms of its success. Within an ARLC, building leadership must focus on the level of the overall commitment to fostering and promoting the necessary cultural change. Further, the leadership should focus on sustaining this commitment throughout the faculty and staff. Focusing on the school's mission and vision, while leading by example, is paramount in sustaining these types of efforts. Faculty and staff in the school must know and see, on a daily basis, that the principal and assistant principal(s) are equally committed to the overall success of the learning community and that they will be supportive of faculty and staff needs. Knowing that teachers have the logistical

and emotional support from administrators and their colleagues can be highly influential in the success of school improvement efforts throughout a building.

A few years ago, I worked closely with a school in Birmingham, Michigan, at the request of the building principal. The particular school was a science and technology school for grades 3-8, and the principal invited me to come to the school and spend a day working with the staff to begin implementing action research, and to do so using a learning community mindset. The principal and assistant principal challenged their teachers to individually or collaboratively design and implement their own action research projects, in an effort to target self-identified areas in need of improvement. Not only did the principal and assistant principal *support* their teachers' efforts by providing them with the appropriate time and resources, but they also designed and conducted *their own* action research project, examining their professional communication style within the school setting. The fact that they joined in this empowering innovation mindset alongside their teachers still impresses me to this day. They have continued to build and sustain the action research community that they began that year; it has become part of their culture and professional support has served as a significant piece.

### ***Roles for District Administrators in ARLCs***

If the proposed ARLC is to be a district-wide effort, then district-level administrators play an essential role, as well. They must be able to promote and facilitate not only enhanced student learning, but also improvements in adult learning. In other words, they must be the ambassadors for a shift in culture that promotes a new model of professional development for faculty and staff in the district. They must be able to emphasize the importance of reflective practice and self-guided inquiry into context-specific teaching and learning.

DuFour et al. (2008) recommended the following keys for shaping a new culture within a PLC, and specifically, within an ARLC. First, district leaders must capitalize on every aspect of an effective change process in order to present a compelling rationale for moving forward. Second, district leaders must communicate the priorities of the learning community effectively and consistently. Third, district leadership must be strategic in terms of limiting comprehensive initiatives in order to allow for the sustained focus that is necessary for an ARLC initiative. Finally, district leaders must help school personnel build a collective capacity to achieve their missions by embedding ongoing professional development as a routine part of the job of being a professional educator.

Comprehensive change initiatives, such as designing and implementing an ARLC, will never be sustainable and effective without the support, driving influence, and leadership by example that comes from both the district and building levels.

### ***Using ARLCs to Deepen Professional Learning and Improve Student Learning***

In today's schools, we must operate under the assumption that our professional educators already possess a good deal of professional knowledge and are capable of extending their own learning. Furthermore, there are types of professional learning that can support educators in terms of what they already know, but also encourage them to develop new knowledge, sometimes on their own. Action research lends itself very nicely to this concept, in that the

process requires educators to reflect on and evaluate what they are already doing, to assess their own effectiveness, and then attempt new or different methods to enhance their effectiveness and their students' learning.

The true benefit of action research as professional learning is that it provides the mechanism for an educator to focus his or her professional growth specifically on the aspects of the teaching-learning process that have been identified by the teacher as being in immediate need. The focus is on the teacher's school, classroom, and students, with an emphasis on improved student achievement. It is customizable and meaningful professional development, designed to meet a teacher's specific needs (Mertler, 2013). Since it is geared specifically toward those needs along with the needs of the students, action can be taken immediately.

If we mix in the concept of a professional learning community, we are able to add the final two necessary ingredients in forming a highly-beneficial system of professional learning: collaboration and support. Collaboration is an incredibly powerful method for identifying, targeting, and resolving the classroom struggles and challenges that teachers face in their classrooms on a daily basis. Collegial support aides the process, highlights the notion that other educators most likely have experienced similar struggles and challenges, and assumes an empathetic stance in resolving the issue(s).

It should follow logically that if we are targeting and improving specific aspects of our instruction based on the data collected from our students, we should also be enhancing the learning experiences for students. After all, this was the initial basis for us in determining which specific aspects of our teaching we want to target for improvement. If our students are not performing well in some aspect of our coursework or class, we want improvement to occur.

For example, let us assume that I am a high school biology teacher (which I actually was many years ago). Although I loved to teach mitosis and meiosis, my students frequently struggled with these processes. Year after year, the particular mix of students that I had in my classes did not matter; they routinely did not do well on the corresponding unit test. In this case, an action research learning community could have assisted in critically evaluating my teaching, investigating new ways of teaching and reinforcing the material, and developing a variety of formative and summative assessments for the purpose of having students demonstrate mastery.

Because action research can be individualized and is customizable, action research learning communities provide opportunities for schools to target a wide variety of reform initiatives and innovations. Whereas some schools might focus their professional learning communities on highly specific curricular and/or social initiatives, schools that operate as action research learning communities have the ability to not only target a variety of initiatives, but can also develop, adapt, and transform those initiatives over time. However, it is important to understand that the basic structure of the ARLC does not have to change year in and year out. In fact, the infrastructure of an ARLC can remain intact, theoretically for decades. The reason for this is that the fundamental structure of an action research learning community, which includes a focus on research, collaboration, and support, serves as a flexible and powerful mechanism for achieving an unlimited number of school reform initiatives.

## REFERENCES

- Clauset, K. H., Lick, D. W., & Murphy, C. U. (2008). *Schoolwide action research for professional learning communities: Improving student learning through the whole-faculty study groups approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- DuFour, R., DuFour, R., & Eaker, R. (2008). *Revisiting professional learning communities at work: New insights for improving schools*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.
- Hord, S. M. (1997). *Professional learning communities: Communities of continuous inquiry and improvement*. Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.
- Johnson, A. P. (2012). *A short guide to action research* (4th ed.). Boston: Pearson.
- Mertler, C. A. (2013). Classroom-based action research: Revisiting the process as customizable and meaningful professional development for educators. *Journal of Pedagogic Development*, 3(3), 39-43. Available online: <http://www.beds.ac.uk/>
- Mertler, C. A. (2014). *Action research: Improving schools and empowering educators* (4th ed.). Los Angeles: Sage.

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Craig A. Mertler is currently an Associate Professor and Director of the EdD Program in Leadership & Innovation at Arizona State University. He began his career as a high school biology teacher, and has been an educator for 31 years, 21 of those in higher education and 6 as an administrator (department chair, doctoral program director, and education dean). He teaches courses focused on the application of action research to promote educator empowerment, school improvement, and job-embedded professional development, and also teaches research methods, statistical analyses, and educational assessment methods. He has served as the research methodology expert on more than 100 doctoral dissertations and Masters theses. He is the author of 20 books, five invited book chapters, and 18 refereed journal articles. He has presented more than 35 research papers at professional meetings. Dr. Mertler's primary research interests include classroom-based action research, and topics related to classroom assessment, assessment literacy, and data-driven educational decision-making, and he also conducts professional development trainings for in-service educational professionals on these topics.

## **PREFERRED CITATION**

**Mertler, C.A. (2016). Leading and facilitating educational change through action research learning communities. *Journal of Ethical Educational Leadership*, 3(3), 1-11.  
Retrieved from: <http://www.cojeel.org>.**

# ***JEEL***

*[www.cojeel.org](http://www.cojeel.org)*

**The views expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of  
*JEEL's* Editorial staff.**

***JEEL* is a free, open-access online journal.**

**Copyright ©2016 (ISSN 2377-4975)**

**Permission is hereby granted to copy any article provided that the Journal of Ethical  
Educational Leadership is credited and copies are not sold.**