What are Small Schools, Small Learning Communities, and Learning Communities of Practice?

By Peter C. Lippman, Assoc. AIA

Part I

Approximately six months ago, I began researching an article evaluating small learning communities (SLC). The goal of this article was to identify the patterns used, see how each was organized into the spaces, and determine if these elements promoted opportunities for learning. Building on this evaluation, I was encouraged by colleagues to consider whether SLCs might be designed to support approximately 500 students. However, the question becomes, "If the SLCs can support this number of students, can these settings still be referred to as small learning communities?" For me, a new term referring to these environments needed to be developed along with a vision of what type of places these settings might be.

However, I found the concept of the SLC to be ambiguous; for, the notion of SLCs is described synonymously with the concept of small schools. Another question is raised, "Can the terminology of school be used when referring to a learning community?" The purpose of this article is to work through these confusions and provide terminology to describe the larger learning community. Given this, this article will attempt to:

- characterize small schools
- differentiate the notions about small schools from the concept of small learning communities (SLC)
- propose the term learning communities of practice (LCP) as the larger autonomous places that can support the educational needs of 400 students
- evaluate the LCP in terms of the literature
- consider design patterns for these learning communities of practice.

Since the goals of this article are rather extensive, the editors recommended that this article be submitted in two parts. The first will characterize small schools, differentiate the notions about small schools from the concept of SLCs, and propose a description of the term Learning Communities of Practice; the second will evaluate the LCP in terms of the literature and consider design patterns for these settings.

Characterizing Small Schools

Over the last 40 years, research has examined the benefits for building small schools (Cotton, 1996; Barker & Gump, 1964). Regardless of the era, the findings are consistent. Small schools are safe, personalized, and equitable (Raywid & Oshiyama, 2000; Cotton, 1996; Barker & Gump, 1964). By creating a safe, equitable, and personalized environments, students' achievement have increased and they have a greater opportunity to participate in a variety of activities in which they can further develop themselves (Cotton, 1996; Barker & Gump, 1964).

In Small School Great Strides: A Study of New Small Schools In Chicago, the report specified that these settings should support "...a small number of students, no more than 100 to 350 in elementary schools and 500 in secondary schools..." (Wasley et al., 2000, p.15). Whereas this study recommended a maximum of 500 students, in other areas of the country, small schools are constructed to support a maximum of 900 students (The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, 2004). However, Raywid indicated successful urban schools, enroll between 200 and 400 students (2000).
Regardless of size of these learning environments, the fundamental characteristic associated with the milieu known as "school" is a setting where typically information is obtained, rather than where knowledge is acquired (Figure 1). School: have not been places where children develop knowledge as distinguished from information (Rivlin & Wolf, 1985). These environments are "teacher-centered" and are structured to support passive learning (Figure 2). The instructor is the "content provider" who typically stands at the front of the room, leads the discussions while students seated in rows, listens, and records what they are being told (Oliver, 2004). In these environments, the students have limited and peripheral engagement with the activities at hand.

Differentiating Small Learning Communities from Small Schools

Since the connotation associated with the concept of school implies limited and peripheral engagement with the tasks at hand (Rivlin & Wolf, 1985), small schools are not small learning communities (SLCs). SLCs are separate learning units within larger schools (Figure 3) and are organized around specialized settings, such as art, theater, music or technology (Massengale, 2006). The size of elementary schools are structured to support no more than 350 students and the pedagogy is to provide opportunities for experiential and active learning, but middle schools and high schools are not structured for active learning and full engagement in the projects-at-hand. SLCs build on the concepts used in the elementary grades and are designed to engage no more than 200 students—middle school and/or high school (Meier, 2006).

Small schools imply teacher-centered and passive learning environments; SLCs are understood as "learner-centered" an encourage active learning. Additionally, these settings are structured to support low levels of adult direction and where students are able to fully participate in the activities at hand (Tharp & Gallimore, 1997). Within these settings, the teacher becomes the facilitator of knowledge rather than the source of knowledge (Oliver & Lippman, in press). The facilitator engages and guides the students in the projects at hand. As students become more engaged in the problems, the facilitator's engagement becomes limited to overseeing the work that is being developed. While their role has seemingly diminished, the facilitators are in all ways ready to guide students who are working through the constraints of each task (Greeno, 1998). SLCs are places that are structured so that individuals develop practical skills that progress throughout the students' everyday experiences (Lave, 1996; Perkins, 1993).

Learning Communities of Practice

SLCs are also places where students are engaged in activities and where learning and knowing extend beyond the confines of the classroom and into all the spaces of the educational environment (Bronkort, 1995; Cole, 1995; Cole & Engestrom, 1993; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Zinchenko, 1995). Although these settings support a limited number of students and are understood as separate from the larger learning community, the question becomes, "Can SLCs be designed to support a large learning community?" Whereas student participation peaks in high schools with 61 to 150 students (Kirkpatrick, 2002), the goal of these learning environments would be for full engagement by all students in the activities at hand. These larger communities should be designed to support a maximum of 400 students (Massengale, 2006). Finally, these learning communities should be envisioned as free-standing or autonomous structures as opposed to being a SLC within a school building. Given this, the author asserts that these larger communities be referred to as learning communities of practice (LCP) and that LCPs should be considered the norm when designing learning environments.

The notion of the LCP links SLCs with the concepts developed in Wenger's book, Communities of Practice (1998). SLCs are specialized settings within larger educational settings; the LCP would be the larger autonomous environment that SLCs inhabit. The LCP should be envisioned as a place where individuals are in the practice of learning, actively engaged in the tasks-at-hand. Additionally, these settings should not be referred to as small schools, due to the connotation of what the term "school" implies. Another reason for advocating for the term LCP as the larger autonomous setting is that communities of practice (CP) extends the concept of SLCs. While SLCs are understood as learner-centered environments where students are engaged in appropriating knowledge for themselves, CPs ascribe to a conceptual framework for how the psychological and social environments function in the physical environment so that learning occurs.

Part 2 of this article will build on the concepts presented here. Part 2 will also evaluate the LCP in terms of the literature and consider design patterns for these settings. These patterns will be evaluated in relationship to the research on learning environments along with psychological theories on how people acquire knowledge. The design patterns will include, but are not limited to the following:

- activity settings—fixed and flexible
- transitional zones—interior and exterior
- L-shaped classrooms
- clustering classrooms to extend learning opportunities
- the vision for the larger autonomous place understood as the LCP
Peter C. Lippman works in the education practice with JCJ Architecture in New York City. Peter received a master's degree in psychology from the Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York for his research on the situated nature of learning. Building on this research, he has presented his work nationally and internationally, guest lectured at various colleges in New York City, and published various articles that have examined and described innovative concepts for the design of learning environments. Additionally, Peter teaches at the School of Architecture, Urban Design and Landscape Architecture of CUNY. 

© 2004 The American Institute of Architects | www.aia.org
References


