1

The Learner–Learner Model

SECTION ONE: WHAT IS THE LEARNER–LEARNER MODEL?

The Learner–Learner model was a term that evolved out of planning and developing the district's design for a professional learning virtual campus. The model supports the design and structure of a community of continuous shared learning in a collaborative culture of professional development. The Learner–Learner model is based on the tenets of Vygotsky's social constructivist theory (1978) and the constructs of andragogy (Knowles, 1980).

The Learner–Learner model supports learning in all environments; however, in a computing Web-based learning community, this model enables learners to collaboratively co-construct meaning of concepts using technology as a conduit for shared knowledge development. This experience is enhanced when the technology supports a collaboration platform and professional learning activity that provide the organizational and process structure that brings two or more participants together to learn through shared decision making, peer interactions, reflections, and performance expectations (see Figure 1A). Thus, the tenets of

Figure 1A

The Learner – Learner Model
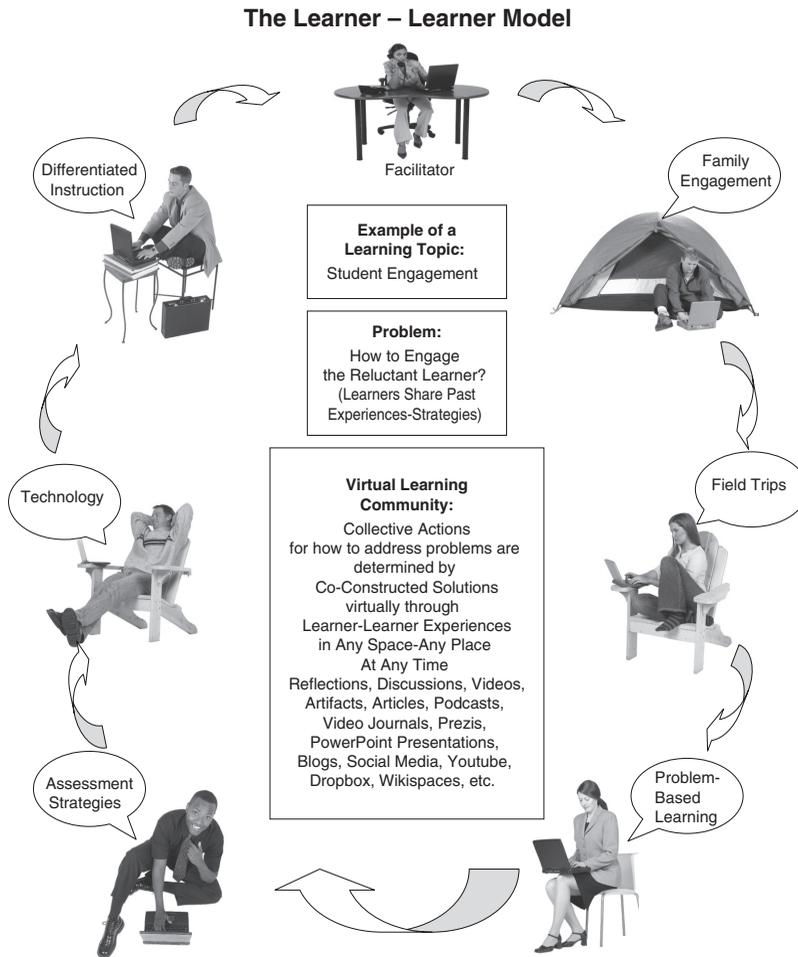
this model support the social constructivist theory, the concepts of andragogy, and the development of a learning community within the actual and virtual classroom.

Section Two: What Is Social Constructivism?

Social constructivism emphasizes the importance of culture and context in understanding what occurs in society and constructing knowledge based on this understanding (Derry, 1999;

McMahon, 1997). Instructional models based on the social constructivist perspective stress the need for collaboration among learners and with practitioners in the society (Lave & Wenger, 1991; McMahon, 1997). Lave and Wenger (1991) assert that a society's practical knowledge is situated in relations among practitioners, their practice, and the social organization and political economy of communities of practice. Their model of situated learning proposed that learning involved a process of engagement in a community of practice. For this reason, learning should involve such knowledge and practice (Gredler, 1997; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Social constructivist approaches can include reciprocal teaching, peer collaboration, cognitive apprenticeships, problem-based instruction, webquests, anchored instruction, and other methods that involve learning with others (Schunk, 2000). Social constructivism is based on specific assumptions about reality, knowledge, and learning.

> **Reality:** Social constructivists believe that reality is constructed through human activity. Members of a society together invent the properties of the world (Kukla, 2000). For the social constructivist, reality cannot be discovered: It does not exist prior to its social invention.

> **Knowledge:** To social constructivists, knowledge is also a human product and is socially and culturally constructed (Ernest, 1999; Gredler, 1997; Prawat & Floden, 1994). Individuals create meaning through their interactions with each other and with the environment they live in.

> **Learning:** Social constructivists view learning as a social process. It does not take place only within an individual, nor is it a passive development of behaviors that are shaped by external forces (McMahon, 1997). Meaningful learning occurs when individuals are engaged in social activities.

Social Constructivism as a Theory That Supports Professional Development

Social constructivist theory is rooted in the interaction of two or more people. More specifically, it supports peer collaboration and learning that is viewed as a social process. The tenets of this

theory are a basis for educators continuing to enhance the profession through socially constructed activities in a learning community. Through structured professional development activities of two or more people, educators are guided through reflective practice and deep thinking. This type of professional development is a powerful approach to promote teacher learning. Peer collaboration requires discussion, reflection, and observation. This type of teacher learning encourages an active role for each participant in the learning community.

Too often, professional development structures are designed such that the teacher has a passive role; the term most frequently used is *sit and get*. Though these sessions provide valuable information about strategies, the teacher as the learner has a passive role and is often unable to engage in deep reflective conversation with a peer or the presenter in support of how this information will be transferred into skill development and, ultimately, the classroom environment. Researchers have made numerous reflections in the field of professional development on measuring impact that have highlighted the ineffectiveness of "sit and get." This type of learning environment does not support peer collaboration or the engaging interaction of conversation or collaboration among teachers and has thereby been determined ineffective in producing transformational change among teachers' knowledge, skills, or behaviors.

Professional development should be designed based upon brain research and learning style theory with the implementation of strategies that facilitate comprehension and retention (Tate, 2004. Dr. Tate identifies several strategies in her publication *Sit and Get Won't Grow Dendrites: 20 Professional Learning Strategies That Engage the Adult Brain*, such as:

- brainstorming and discussion
- project-based and problem-based instruction
- reciprocal teaching, cooperative learning, and peer coaching
- visuals
- writing

Learners should be active participants. Only when professional developers engage them in the process of learning through engaging strategies will we see the results we seek to improve and enhance teacher learning and teaching quality. This is a non-negotiable aspect of high-quality professional development. Interaction and engagement are key to adult learning! But they must be meaningful and relevant.

Teacher learning is supported by all aspects of learning theory. Learning is an active and intellectual process; therefore, it is important for the teacher to be the one doing the intellectual work (Danielson, 2009). Reflective dialogue with peers about practice using analytical and evaluative skills requires teachers to examine the instructional decisions they make that contribute to the process of thinking and learning (Danielson, 2009). However, the role of another person is critical. The social process of learning with others allows for the two to construct meaning and enhance the body of knowledge about teacher practices and effective use of new skills that are learned in a professional-development activity. Thus, in the Learner–Learner model, this process is considered the roadmap to creating a symbiotic relationship between peers and co-construction of knowledge in support of improved practice. This is enhanced in professional-development activities that are guided by clear standards of practice, and the collaboration, peer feedback, and reflection should be executed against the learning standards of the professional-development activity. This process provides the structure to close the professional learning and performance gaps that impede teacher effectiveness and support the opportunity for the teacher (learner) and facilitator (learner) in a professional-development activity to move toward the teacher's quest to strengthen and develop her or his skills around the standard of learning for that activity.

Too often, teachers participate in quality learning experiences, but there is no opportunity to follow up, practice, or continue to engage with others around the new learning. In the Learner–Learner model, the facilitator learns from the teachers as the teachers learn from each other and the facilitator. The learning activity is continuous and is not isolated to one setting, at

one time, in one place, with sometimes only one opportunity to learn form each other. In the Learner–Learner model, the learning process threads through all members in an active and ongoing cycle of engagement, feedback, and reflection, as noted in Figure 1A. Knowledge is shared and continues to flow through the participants and the facilitator using the power and magic of technology! The facilitator orchestrates the environment for this type of learning to occur using a variety of tools and resources that foster engagement, feedback, and reflection among all the learners in the community. This co-constructed reflection and feedback enables the participants to develop meaning and understanding against standards and ultimately improve their practice, which is the goal of any quality professional-development activity. No longer do learners work in isolation or solve problems in silos. Learners come together and develop solutions together throughout the learning activity with other learners who have experienced or will experience similar challenges. They are able to co-construct strategies to improve practice and impact student learning. This level of engagement enhances the power of social constructivist principles in professional-development activities.

SECTION THREE: WHAT IS ANDRAGOGY AND HOW DOES IT SUPPORT THE LEARNER–LEARNER MODEL?

Andragogy is said to be rooted in the approaches of Plato and his teacher, Socrates. The term was initially used by Alexander Kapp in 1833. Kapp applied it to the necessity of lifelong learning through self-reflection as introduced by Plato. The term was used throughout Europe and eventually was introduced to a professor of adult education at Boston University, Malcolm Knowles.

   The intent of the concept of andragogy was to present a shift from pedagogical approaches that were teacher directed to a learner-centered methodology in which the needs of the learner are considered and the learner collaborates with the instructor in decisions that are made about the learner's education. The role of the instructor is that of facilitator and coach instead of expert authoritarian (Bolden, 2008). Andragogy originally supported

the idea that adults require unique designs for learning. It was determined to be the art and science of teaching adults how to learn by Alexander Kapp in 1833 and further developed into a full theory of adult education by Malcolm Knowles. However, in Knowles's 1980 publication, his thoughts on four of the five key assumptions of andragogy apply equally to adults and children, but children have fewer experiences and preestablished beliefs than adults do.

According to Knowles (1973), the following facets to learning listed support androgogic principles:

- Learners are problem centered rather than content centered.
- Instructors permit and encourage the active participation of the learners.
- Instructors encourage the learner to introduce past experiences into the learning process in order to reexamine those experiences in the light of new data.
- The climate of learning must be collaborative (instructor to learner and learner to learner) as opposed to authority oriented.
- The learning environment (planning, conducting, evaluating) is a mutual activity between learner and instructor.
- Evaluation leads to appraisal of needs and interests and therefore to the redesign of new learning activities.
- Activities are experimental.

Thus, the primary function of the instructor is to become a guide to the process of learning, not a manager of content. The learning guide uses two-way communication to establish the objectives and methods of the learning process.

How Does Andragogy Support the Learner–Learner Model?

Andragogy concepts support the constructs of learning being a mutual activity between the learners and the facilitator and among the learners. There is no hierarchal process through

which those who know are expected and required to teach those who do not know. The climate in the Learner–Learner model is at all times based on collaboration and is social, not done in isolation. The context of learning in the Learner–Learner model supports problem identification and resolution among the learners in the community or the class. The Learner–Learner model provides for active involvement of the participants at all times. In a technology-centered environment, this can happen at any time, in any place or space. This is one of the many reasons this is such a powerful method of professional development for very busy educators who fight for time for their own learning on a constant basis.

> Learning is enhanced when it is more like a team effort than a solo race. Good learning, like good work, is collaborative and social, not competitive and isolated. Working with others often increases involvement in learning. Sharing one's ideas and responding to others improves thinking and deepens understanding.—*Chickering & Gamson, 1987, p. 1*

The Learner–Learner model encourages peer-to-peer reflections through facilitated self-directed learning experiences. It is critical that time be allotted for facilitator feedback as well as individual and peer reflection in an ongoing discussion forum in learning communities. This is the arena in which previous experiences enhance the learning and support co-constructed solutions to problems that learners face in education. The quality of effort in this reflective collaborative format combats the lack of time learners often have for their own learning when the learning is isolated. Providing a learning environment in the Learner–Learner model of learning in which colleagues can learn from each other capitalizes on the time that is lost, provides deeper levels of involvement, and enhances the learning opportunity for all in the learning community.

SECTION FOUR: THE LEARNER–LEARNER MODEL AS A BASIS FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Professional development that improves the learning of all students provides educators with the knowledge and skills to collaborate (National Staff Development Council, 2001). In a professional learning community (PLC), the vision grows as people work together and collaborate over time. The community of learners constructs a vision through shared collective decisions regarding the improvements they will work toward for the increased learning of students. Simply stated, they learn from each other in a collaborative environment, co-constructing meaning out of this experience. "Professional Learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students occurs within learning communities committed to continuous improvement, collective responsibility, and goal alignment" (Learning Forward, 2011, p. 24).

The Learner–Learner model supports a community of continuous, simultaneous learning and leading opportunities among learners in a collaborative culture. Through professional-development structures, this model delivers cognitive (learning) opportunities for shared concept construction and development to occur between two or more people. Roland Barth (2006) described and distinguished a culture of shared decision making by the following actions taken by teachers: talking with one another about their practice, sharing their craft knowledge, observing one another while they are engaged in practice, and rooting for one another's success.

As identified by Hord and Sommers (2009), a PLC is characterized by adult learners coming together to study collegially and work collaboratively. They are continuously learning together and applying what they have learned to their work. The major emphasis in a collaborative community is on collective learning, when individuals learn more than if they are learning independently. The PLC is not just about collaboration; it is about collaborating to learn together about a topic the community deems (*through shared collective decisions*) important. The learning is focused on effective teaching and increased student learning.

Successful learning communities build shared knowledge bases, and this knowledge contributes to enhanced possibilities for the community's vision.

The *learning* in successful learning communities is supported by collegial inquiry, enhanced through guided reflection by the participants (learners) who share dialogue about their reflection and create new knowledge to shape their craft. The conversations focus on their practice and how it impacts the students they teach. These conversations can be initiated through discussion prompts by which participants are asked and share with others how their learning influences their teaching practices, which affects student learning outcomes, and how their learning influenced the levels of student achievement and what gaps still exist that require additional emphasis on their learning. It is also a time in which discoveries are made and the potential and possibilities for impact to teaching and learning structures are uncovered and shared with others. Teachers facilitate the work of changing practice with each other. They support the implementation of new practices through peer coaching and feedback. This process is grounded in individual and community improvement. Learning is in the relationships between people (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Professional learning communities are where learners come together to problem solve and create new conditions for learning for students. Such new conditions could be new instructional strategies for challenged learning, new curriculum, revising regulations, policies to serve students, and so on. The awesome power in this process is that two or more learners (Learner–Learner) come together to construct knowledge that will impact the structures of education for years to come, as in curriculum development, or make the difference in the learning for the student who has not experienced success for years—or, sadly, never experienced success at all as a learner. No matter if the co-constructed knowledge shapes the world or shapes one child who will shape the world, the focus of two or more people learning together to change the world one student at a time is simply transformational as a process!

The good news is that PLCs provide the right environment for learners coming together. The Learner–Learner model thrives using learning communities as a conduit to bring two or more people together to co-construct meaning of their learning. However, schools are challenged with bringing learners together because the structure of schools does not provide teachers the *time* to come together. One of the most challenging factors schools face in initiating and creating learning communities is that of time. However, time is the factor that central offices, superintendents, school boards, and school-based leaders can influence. Boyd (1992) enumerated a list of physical factors needed in a context conducive to change and improvements: availability of needed resources; schedules and structures that reduce isolation; and policies that provide greater autonomy, foster collaboration, provide effective communication, and provide staff development. Louis and Kruse (1995) offer a similar list: time to meet and talk, physical proximity of the staff to one another, teaching roles that are interdependent, communication structures, school autonomy, and teacher empowerment. The bad news is that as we continue to strive to provide these structures, the hardest resource to capture of all of the above is time. However, in an virtual learning community, relational factors and human capacities have a different view. Online virtual learning communities are catalysts to avoid this isolation and address the oh-too-common challenge of time! The collaborative platforms in virtual classrooms address the communication, isolation, and collaboration.

Learning in a *virtual learning community* supports the Learner–Learner model and affords participants an opportunity to function as a learning community of professionals. The Learner–Learner model presupposes that there is a symbiotic relationship between people in a learning environment that grows out of co-construction of knowledge. This development and acquisition of knowledge is supported through the use of a virtual collaborative platform. In the virtual learning community, educators learn from the course facilitator and other educators. The course facilitator does not own all of the information but

does facilitate the participants' ability to obtain it through the use of technology and the implementation of the tenets of the Learner–Learner model.

This book will identify the processes of how professional learning facilitators served as guides in a Learner–Learner environment enhanced by a virtual collaborative platform. Aspects of this transformational process of learning for teachers will be highlighted in this book. This book will identify that when using technology as a resource, participants are able to collaborate with other participants, refine their thinking, and expand their learning opportunities across the boundaries of physical proximity, which leads to higher levels of teaching quality and performance and new structures of learning to impact the world for years to come.

SECTION FIVE: THE LEARNER IS THE TEACHER IN A VIRTUAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

The first step in ensuring true change in a classroom and placing learning at the center is having a teacher who understands and values knowledge acquisition in his/her own development. This teacher should consistently reach out to other educators in her building, creating a collegial professional environment. He or she should be involved in socially constructing meaning of teaching structures with others in the school through professional learning communities, peer observations, and self-reflection. Through technology, this virtual development can occur in a network of schools across town, in another state, and in another country. However, it is equally as powerful in one school! (See Chapter 6 to learn more about virtual-learning school-based cohorts.)

Learners will use these social networking structures to pose questions to a problem-based dilemma, to view model lessons, to learn new content, and to stay abreast of the latest research and be active members in a professional learning network that includes

teachers, professors, principals, and educational philosophers. If teachers are learning without boundaries, the concept can become more concrete than abstract for them, and shared learning becomes richly infused and enhanced learning. In turn, they can begin to transfer this type of learning culture by using the ideals of the Learner–Learner model with their students. Too often, after teachers leave their preservice college experiences, they forget to view themselves as learners! This publication will make strong parallels between what we now know as professional learning communities and what this author will term a virtual learning community. Because of the powerful networking tools of the 21st century, teacher preparation and learning can come in real time from many different perspectives, have various approaches, challenge teachers' thinking like never before, help pull them out of their isolated realm of learning, and open them up to full collaboration, shared decision making, collective thinking, and planning with other educators.

With virtual learning communities, the barriers and isolated events surrounding knowledge are no more! Web 2.0 places users on a two-way information highway. Information and knowledge about effective teaching and learning can be shared and received as often, and as much as the learner desires, and with a choice on how to receive it. Collaborative technology platforms such as those used in social media have empowered educators and experts to weigh in on topics that are meaningful to them and furthermore to place their issues and expertise on the front line of the educational debate. According to Learning Forward (2011), "technology facilitates and expands community interaction, learning, resource archiving and sharing, and knowledge construction and sharing" (p. 25). Virtual conferences and professional-learning networks have changed the way we look at knowledge acquisition. When these two are paired and supported by the tenets of the Learner–Learner model, you get a high-powered virtual learning community of educators who are in full control of their growth and development as effective teachers and leaders.

The more one educator's learning is shared and supported by others, the more quickly the culture of continuous improvement, collective responsibility, and high expectations for students and educators grows. Collective responsibility and participation foster peer-to-peer support for learning and maintain a consistent focus on shared goals within and across communities. (Learning Forward, 2011, p. 25)