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## **A teacher union's collaborative research agenda and strategies: One way forward for Canadian teacher unions in supporting teachers' Professional Development?**

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# **A teacher union's collaborative research agenda and strategies: One way forward for Canadian teacher unions in supporting teacher Professional Development?**

## **Introduction**

Recent discussion of Canadian Social Science Research Futures (SSHRC, 2004) has included a significant focus on networks and collaborations. OECD reports (2003, 2004) similarly stress networks and knowledge management. In British Columbia, the office of the Auditor General (2003) stated that:

*“The importance of collaboration in education has been well documented in education reform literature. Developing capacities to support collaboration within and across communities provides opportunities to gain the shared knowledge and understanding necessary to develop and build upon a collective vision of realizing sustained education improvement. Communities that recognize the importance of collaboration understand that collective knowledge can generate new ideas, create group cohesion around a shared purpose, and foster a learning organization.” (p6)*

Networking and collaboration are at the forefront of current Canadian Social Science research thinking, an issue of interest in educational systems in those countries which are members of the OECD, and are being widely considered within the educational literature in the context of schooling in post-industrial economies, as well as in business literature with a focus on Strategic Alliances.

Should teacher unions be considering the potential for collaboration within projects and with external agencies as they develop approaches to supporting teachers' Professional Development? Before assessing the potential of collaboration, should they be considering which forms of Professional Development they wish to promote and support? What can teacher unions learn from their experiences in collaborations to date, and can such experiences be analyzed within the context of the current literature?

In exploring the concept of collaboration, a distinction must be made between the idea of teachers collaboratively experiencing an inquiry or Professional Development experience, and the inter-organizational collaboration that might involve teacher unions, school districts, universities, and community organizations. Both are explored in this paper, with the British Columbia examples of collaboration being collaborative in terms of teacher participation, and involving a range of organizations.

This paper will describe three collaborations involving one teacher union, the British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF), based in Vancouver, Canada. The BCTF is the only K–12 teacher union in B.C.'s public school system, and represents all 42,000 teachers in that system. The three collaborations are:

1. A federally-funded (Social Science and Humanities Research Council) project with several universities and school districts in two Canadian provinces.
2. A project in one province to support “Teaching to Diversity” in three school districts, with a focus on web-based information for teachers.
3. Teacher union participation in a “National Summit on Inclusive Education” and with local community organizations, with a focus on inclusive education.

The paper will consider these three projects in the context of the current literature on Professional Development, networking, and collaboration, and identify ways for teacher unions to support teacher inquiry and Professional Development in partnership with external organizations as an option in supporting the Professional Development of teachers.

## **Current literature on Professional Development**

This paper will not repeat the many reviews of Professional Development that can be found in the educational literature, but will focus primarily on papers written by Randi & Zeichner (2004), Sparks (2002), and Hargreaves (2000, 2003). Randi & Zeichner and Sparks essentially incorporate most of the key debates and themes linked to teachers’ Professional Development, while Hargreaves contextualizes Professional Development by articulating historical, evolving, and futuristic phases for teaching and schooling.

Randi & Zeichner (2004) offer a wide-ranging review of the history, current practices, and their preferred directions for the future evolution of teachers’ Professional Development. They distinguish between “staff” development and “professional” development, arguing that the former often reflected a view of teachers as technicians, undergoing staff development in order to be trained in how to implement programs. Professional Development, which, they argue, involved teachers as “active learners in their own professional growth, rather than passive recipients of others’ ideas” (p188). Randi & Zeichner also argue that the notion of staff development implies some form of deficit in the recipients, requiring training, compared with autonomous professionals who extend their education through Professional Development. Thus staff development in their view has often consisted of training, usually imposed and often linked to lower-order, non-professional work.

Inherent within this distinction is the element of the individual subject to the control of a hierarchy within an organization or structure. The autonomous professional chooses and is trusted to choose the areas of Professional Development he or she wishes to choose. There is minimal or no overt pressure to attend courses, hence minimal influence of an organization or employer on the individual. In contrast, the person being “developed” may be given a range of options for staff development, or may be more directly steered into a specific training unit. It can be argued that both apply within many educational contexts, sometimes in combination. The school-district Professional Development day may offer a program from which teachers choose, or it may allow teachers to engage in teacher action research or study groups.

In considering preferred directions for teachers' Professional Development, Randi & Zeichner draw upon the "teacher knowledge" literature, as well as social cognitive theory, adult learning theory, and what can be learned from the history of staff/Professional Development. Their preferred directions encapsulate forms of Professional Development that build individual and system capacity by respecting teacher knowledge, collaboration with peers to focus on reflections on practice and solving or addressing problems, and developing new knowledge "from the sharing of expertise among members of teacher learning communities". Four examples of such Professional Development are considered, all of which stress collaborative approaches:

- **Teacher Networks**, which generally incorporate facilitative leadership and collaborative learning approaches, with respect for both context-specific and generalized knowledge.
- **Teacher Research**, featuring voluntary participation, a balance between respect for and challenge of perspectives, teacher ownership of focus and methods, and taking place over time so that rituals and routines occur to build community.
- **Teacher Study Groups**, often school-based, with agendas of common interest to the participants, with possible areas of focus including teaching strategies, content area, or reading/discussing research.
- **School-University Collaborations**, including Professional Development schools and teacher-research projects, perhaps linking theory with practice "in ways that matter to classroom teachers" (p217)

Randi & Zeichner's analysis is extensive, allowing for an understanding of trends and directions in Professional Development over time. Their preferred directions are non-prescriptive, allowing for adaptation in many contexts.

Sparks (2002) discusses the now ubiquitous phrase "high quality staff development", stating that such development:

- focuses on deepening teachers' content knowledge and pedagogical skills;
- includes opportunities for practice, research and reflection;
- is embedded in educators' work and takes place during the school day;
- is sustained over time; and
- is founded on a sense of collegiality and collaboration among teachers and between teachers and principals in solving important problems relating to teaching and learning. (pp1-4)

While few teachers would argue with Sparks' concept and definition of high quality staff development, most would be hard pressed to find the five definitions or conditions existing in their schools and districts. The issue of concern may not be the concept or the definition of "high quality staff development", but the transfer of concepts into practice, especially in cash-strapped Canadian school districts where money for Professional Development is limited and rationed. This highlights a fundamental problem with Sparks' views – that it means all things to all people. With a focus on "Standards" and student achievement, Sparks appeals to those administering systems, and with a focus on collegiality, collaboration, and teacher leadership, he appeals to classroom teachers, and likely to their unions. The focus on "professional learning communities" and the urge to transform current reality may appear naïve to teachers faced with larger classes and generally fewer resources. Building a professional learning community in schools with

adequate books, teachers, and supports may be very different from building in a community that is unresourced and unsupported, yet always accountable.

Sparks' work is idealistic, arguably unrealistic, and yet also valuable in offering a view of Professional Development that could be supportive and respectful of teachers. In a brief and limited section (pp5–7), Sparks considers teacher unions as “allies in reform”, yet the areas of collaboration between districts and unions appear to fulfill a management rather than a union agenda. There is no mention of a union role in Professional Development other than in terms of labour contracts that “emphasize performance-oriented areas such as quality Professional Development”. Such phrases reflect the apparent need to link all learning to measurable outcomes, surely an oxymoron in what is known about learning, whether in children or adults.

Hargreaves (2000) outlines four stages of teacher professionalism and professional learning:

- **The pre-professional age**, in which teaching was considered technically simple, with common-sense principles and parameters;
- **The age of the autonomous professional**, in which teachers had the right to choose how they taught the students in their charge;
- **The age of the collegial professional**, in which efforts are made to build strong professional cultures of collaboration; and
- **The age of the post-professional or the postmodern professional**, which includes assaults on professionalism by governments initiating change in uncertain times.

Hargreaves argues that although the age of the collegial professional is still evolving:

*“...we are now on the edge of an age of postmodern professionalism where teachers deal with a diverse and complex clientele, in conditions of increasing uncertainty, where many methods of approach are possible, and where more and more social groups have an influence and a say.”*

Hargreaves (2003) contextualizes teacher Professional Development in a present in which he considers teaching has become a less attractive profession, with increased disillusion and burnout, and with greater competition from other professions and business for high-calibre teacher candidates. He points to a future of schooling in a knowledge society where some predictions (OECD, 2003) suggest radical changes to the provision of schooling in post-industrial societies – see the section on OECD, below.

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– Hargreaves

Provincial, state, or national school reform efforts have also impacted on teachers' professional or staff development. When large-scale reforms are promoted, staff development is intended to align teachers with the reform and maximize effective implementation. Much of the literature describes and often supports such approaches, perhaps best exemplified by Fullan (2000), or considers them problematic

and unlikely to effect significant change and improvement unless top-down reforms are reduced and teacher-input increased (Eisner, 1998, p163).

The debate on professional/staff development therefore is conceptual (what is it, and who gets to choose?), organizational (where and how does it fit in structures?), contextual (how will it fit in the schooling of the future), and linked to large-scale systemic reform (how does it make reform X effective?). In recent years the debate has stirred almost evangelical overtones. The authors Sparks (2002) and Randi & Zeichner, who provide the prime sources for this paper, herald “new visions” for Professional Development, prefixed with terms such as “powerful” or “compelling”, descriptors usually viewed with some suspicion by practitioners in schools who have seen many powerful and compelling visions come and go, likely because they were powerful and compelling to their promoters rather than to teachers in schools. Hargreaves earnestly exhorts and supports teachers while warning of shifts in societies and economies that may change the nature of schooling and the scope of Professional Development.

All of these authors are in different ways idealistic pragmatists who are balancing the conceptual, organizational, and systemic thinking and pressures to offer ideas and frameworks for evolving rather than revolutionary Professional Development. They tend not to offer prescriptive solutions but rather broader frameworks within which Professional Development might occur which respects teacher professionalism while also supporting improved student learning. But they also offer explicit stances or preferences that are based on analysis of the literature as well as their own experiences. What they all share is the firm belief that Professional Development is not an isolated or a “one-off” activity – that teachers meeting for Professional Development purposes gain knowledge and understanding in some form of Professional Development over time.

They also stress the notion that preferred forms of Professional Development are also collaborative, involving teachers in discourse, which by involvement in the processes of conversation or dialogue, promotes greater learning and sharing. This common-sense notion has been elevated to near-cult status with the notion of “professional learning communities”, at a time when many school systems have decimated or reduced the quality of school communities by fiscally-driven change, or by accountability-driven demands.

The components of learning communities were listed by Hargreaves (2003) as:

- collaborative work and discussion among the school’s professionals;
- a strong and consistent focus on teaching and learning within that collaborative work; and
- gathering assessment and other data to inquire into and evaluate progress and problems over time.

Hargreaves added:

*“Professional learning communities lead to strong and measurable improvement in students’ learning. Instead of bringing about ‘quick fixes’ of superficial change, they create and support sustainable improvements that last over time, because they build the professional skill and capacity to keep the school progressing.” (p128)*

The school-based nature of professional learning communities was further explored by Eaker *et al.*, (2002) who argued for significant cultural shifts within schools: from isolation to collaboration; from generic to specific statements about students’ learning;

from random to specific values and goals. Collaboration, in Eaker's view (as well as in the views of others promoting professional learning communities), appears prescriptive rather than relationship-based, and reads much like the lists generated during the era of "effective schools". The latter is hardly surprising, as many of the professional-learning-community advocates were previously the proponents of effective schools. The requirements of this form of community appear to subsume the individual to the common good but with processes defined, established, and often controlled.

Dufour *et al* (2005) state that the concept of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) has been widely endorsed by (U.S.) National Commissions/Boards as well as by both of the national U.S. teacher unions, the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). But while the concept appears to have wide support, Dufour *et al* identify three challenges that they believe prevent the concept becoming a reality: developing and applying shared knowledge, sustaining the hard work of change, and transforming school culture. Yet the stating of these challenges implicitly reflects a belief that building community can be achieved through adhering to the recipe-book approach and stern directions of the PLC proponents:

*"Many schools and districts that proudly proclaim they are professional learning communities have shown little evidence of either understanding the core concepts or implementing the practices of PLCs. Educators must develop a deeper, shared knowledge of learning community concepts and practices, and then must demonstrate the discipline to apply those concepts and practices in their own settings if their schools are to be transformed."* (p9)

This kind of lecturing on community-building is not likely to generate wide support among teachers, and the hectoring tone contrasts with the same authors' encouraging messages of collaboration and mutual support. Such a contrast reflects the problematic dichotomy of the literature on professional learning communities: that the positive messages of collaboration are tempered with prescription and control. Telling teachers to "demonstrate the discipline" implies a controlling view of community that perhaps is not shared among many teachers, who might wish for a flatter and more egalitarian form of collegial discourse. To use a medical analogy, Dufour's work implies that success follows adherence to a prescription – using drugs to achieve a cure, which may not always be appropriate, and may sometimes be wrong. Or the cure may be achieved through other, more holistic approaches without resorting to drugs. Those prescribing the drugs see only one solution, yet many people increasingly demand alternatives to drugs mandated by an "expert", so forcing the prescription may generate rejection or non-compliance. Many educators may not choose prescriptions generated by others and forced upon them, a situation surely compatible with teachers as professionals. Approaches that offer structures and options that are flexible and adaptable may have better chances of success and sustainability.



# The teacher union/Professional Development connection

In earlier papers (Naylor, 1997, 2001), I explored the range of literature on teacher unions. Little appears to have changed in terms of people still falling within categories of those who despise, critique, or support teacher unions. From the camp of the despisers has emerged more appallingly researched and poorly referenced diatribes. Brimelow (2003) follows in M. Lieberman's (1997) hyperbolic tradition of telling all in the title but revealing little beyond the cover. Approximately 80 of Brimelow's 313 references are taken from newspapers or magazines, including the *Sacramento Bee* and the *Billings Gazette*, with no references from refereed education journals. None of the recognized academics who write about teacher unions are referenced, unlike authors from a number of "independent" institutes such as the "Pacific Research Institute" (of which Brimelow, coincidentally, is a "senior fellow"). This Institute's web site describes the organization as a "free market think-tank", one of several with overt agendas to destroy unions.

This section of the paper examines the recent literature on those who critique and challenge teacher unions, and who focus in part on the issue of teacher union support for teachers' Professional Development.

Meier (2004) argued for the necessity of including teacher unions in more pragmatic and less confrontational working relationships, and countered claims from M. Lieberman and Brimelow that teacher unions blocked reforms:

*"But the evidence is pretty clear that although unions are a force to be reckoned with, and by nature conservative, especially in defence of basic teacher protections, they have not been a powerful force in preventing school reforms sought by mayors, governors, and local business coalitions – even those that undermine traditional teacher rights."*

Bascia (2000) explored and critiqued the capacity of teacher unions to support teachers' Professional Development, outlining three traditions of teacher Professional Development with which teacher unions have engaged:

- Traditional Staff Development, often in workshops delivered to teachers;
- Professional Development and the new unionism, conceptually more ambitious and often undertaken in partnership with universities or school districts; and
- Organizational involvement as Professional Development, often informal learning activities which may revolve around an emerging issue in a teacher's practice or union participation.

Bascia explores organizational considerations and issues that unions should consider in moving away from the traditional staff development model towards offering richer Professional Development. Four areas are explored:

- how unions socialize teachers, shape teachers' work and Professional Development;
- which members are attracted to and which are alienated by teacher unions;

- how to move beyond a conceptualization of Professional Development and into considering how union systems and structures enable/constrain teacher learning; and
- how to commit to multiple Professional Development strategies.

In later papers, Bascia (2003, 2004) considers several areas as prime foci for teacher unions' professional focus: attracting and retaining teachers, initiating and supporting teachers' professional preparation and on-going learning, and improving teacher quality in a time of systemic reform.

Rodrigue (2000) argues that teacher unions are at a critical point in their evolution. Her exploration of external relevancy suggests that teacher unions, to coin a phrase, "need to get out more". In other words, they need to be better attuned to external voices and views when building and extending participation in union professional activities, while extending their participation in the educational discourse within a wider community. Rodrigue's work speaks to the maintaining of teacher-union identity and focus while having the confidence to participate in wider discourse – which might include collaboration and networking.

Leithwood *et al* (2004) combine the talents and interests of one Canadian province's union- and university-based authors in a form of collaboration that is publication-oriented, exploring curriculum not from organizational standpoints but from interest in joint exploration of practices and issues. Their publication includes a chapter by Bascia, Rodrigue, & Moore, which outlines the potential for greater partnerships among faculties of education, teacher unions, school districts, and parents, arguing that in their view there exists a need for the involvement of multiple educational organizations, and that such groups:

*"...must embark on a continuous, evolving, and dynamic process to work through and beyond narrow, dichotomous thinking, to develop new understandings and new roles. This 'tapestry' notion of support for teaching and learning is quite different from the concept of 'alignment', top-down control or one-upmanship that has characterized educational policies over the last number of years. This undertaking of educational partnerships requires risk-taking as organizations and positions are de-centred from their traditional dichotomous relationships with each other; it requires patience, and above all an understanding that organizational interaction is a necessary part of ensuring the continuous improvement of teaching."* (p125)

Both national U.S. teacher unions have developed programs and partnerships that support teacher Professional Development. The NEA has built partnerships with universities and school districts in support of teacher training and induction, and with the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), to promote staff development programs for experienced teachers, as well as offering on-line Professional Development. One promising initiative from the NEA involved analysis of teacher Professional Development centres, which explored the possibility of partnership with a range of external organizations.<sup>1</sup> In considering future directions, the NEA report stated that a Professional Development centre:

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.nfie.org/publications/centers.htm#organization>

*“...should organize a wide variety of activities carried out by a partnership whose goal is the continuous improvement of instruction leading to gains in student achievement....Essential partners in creating and sustaining a professional development center begin with the teachers’ association at the state or local level, and include the state department of education, the district or districts in the area to be served, public and private higher education institutions (in total, not just the schools of education), and many others, such as business, parents, existing professional development providers, and community organizations.”*

The American Federation of Teachers (2001) prefaced its 2001 report with a definition of a professional union from an earlier (1992) report, stating that the AFT was evolving:

*“from a union that has learned to represent our members’ needs for fair rewards and decent working conditions...to a union that is learning to further members’ aspirations for professional growth and empowerment at the workplace.” (p8)*

The AFT argues that a major reason to move towards greater professional support is partly based on analysis of the changing demographics of teaching. Newer teachers, they argue, do not find stories of old struggles edifying or relevant, and they increasingly demand and expect “an organization that focuses intently on their professional needs” (p13). This analysis suggests dichotomous views between younger/newer teachers and those with significant experience, the latter either more supportive or more accepting of teacher unions’ priority focusing on bargaining and members’ financial and security interests. This view of dichotomous groups of teachers (older–younger teachers) was reinforced by Johnson (2000), who stated that newer teachers “often find the values and priorities of the retiring generation puzzling and outmoded.”

In terms of internal union structures, the AFT report indicates lower status within unions for those activists focusing on professional issues, often working with lower budgets and less likely to occupy leadership positions. This reflects a recurring theme within the literature on teacher unions: that budgets, status, and staffing which promote and support Professional Development do not allow for significant promotion of teacher-led Professional Development by those unions. The AFT report speaks to the need to examine teacher unions’ internal capacity in terms of structures, staffing, and budgets prior to building external collaborations, for there is little purpose in collaborating without the capacity to operate effectively within the collaboration. Examination of internal capacity might also consider the actual utilization of union staff, and whether those ostensibly working in union Professional Development divisions actually do focus on pro-d, or on the many campaigns or current issues initiated by or dealt with by teacher unions.

*“...[educational organizations] must embark on a continuous, evolving, and dynamic process to work through and beyond narrow, dichotomous thinking, to develop new understandings and new roles. This ‘tapestry’ notion of support for teaching and learning is quite different from the concept of ‘alignment’, top-down control or one-upmanship that has characterized educational policies over the last number of years. This undertaking of educational partnerships requires risk-taking as organizations and positions are de-centred from their traditional dichotomous relationships with each other; it requires patience, and above all an understanding that organizational interaction is a necessary part of ensuring the continuous improvement of teaching.”*

– Bascia, Rodrigue, & Moore

Pervading the AFT report are the concepts of networking and collaboration, partly in union-management collaboration but also as one key skill for union leaders who need to:

*“...learn how to build effective coalitions and partnerships with other groups and agencies having similar goals. The union cannot go it alone. It cannot be responsible for absorbing the costs associated with enhancing members’ practice, nor the programs members should have available to them. Union leaders need to be able to develop partnerships and strategic alliances with the district and other organizations, and to work collaboratively to raise funds and develop programs around improved professional practice.” (p15)*

Thus the AFT has produced one of many recent reports stressing the need for unions to find and build networks and collaborations. Urbanski (2003) suggested that without teacher union collaboration with school districts, the best management efforts resembled “one hand clapping,” an image hardly intended as attributing success. In an earlier paper,

*“The union cannot go it alone. It cannot be responsible for absorbing the costs associated with enhancing members’ practice, nor the programs members should have available to them. Union leaders need to be able to develop partnerships and strategic alliances with the district and other organizations, and to work collaboratively to raise funds and develop programs around improved professional practice.”*

– AFT report

Urbanski & Erskine (2000) described a reconceptualization of teacher union roles in processes that are solution-oriented and collaborative between union and management. The Teacher Union Research Network (TURN) initiative appears heavily focused on teacher compensation and pay systems rather than on Professional Development. One major problem with the initiatives described is that they promote reward systems problematic to Canadian teacher unions, namely performance awards and skill-based pay systems. This reflects what may be a

significant cultural difference between Canada and the USA, which should be considered by Canadian teacher unions when they are considering or planning collaborations with external agencies. U.S. teacher unions appear to develop, or to accede more readily to, concepts, proposals, and structures that mirror government or employer norms – a situation less common in Canada.

Black (2002) offers a cautious review of Urbanski and the TURN, curiously placing the onus on the unions to deliver on their aim of improving teaching and raising student achievement. The utility of Black’s brief analysis may be to offer a warning to unions not to promise guaranteed ends through the means they suggest – that collaboration, for example, will increase student achievement. Unions can offer collaboration in good faith, but accountability in collaboration should be shared.

Farmelo (2004) and Koppich & Kerchner (2000) also focus primarily on bargaining and contracts, but the latter raise important points about trust and warn that the “virtue of union-management trust, or collaboration for collaboration’s sake, has been overstated,” especially if such collaboration merely implies civility rather than real progress towards solutions. They indicate that collaboration includes tension and conflict, but that a focus on issues rather than pre-ordained position will assist the collaborating parties.

In summary, the recent writing on the actual and potential roles of teachers unions with a professional focus explores consideration of the changing demographics of the teaching population, teacher unions’ internal capacity and resource allocation for a focus on

professional issues, and collaboration with external agencies. There may be significant contextual and philosophical differences between Canada and the USA, and between Canadian and U.S. teacher unions, which should also be considered before adopting U.S.-style approaches to supporting the professional work of teachers.

## The concept of networking for schools of the future – an OECD perspective

While earlier sections of this paper considered stages of teacher professionalism (Hargreaves, 2000), providing one context for a consideration of how teacher Professional Development might fit within such context, this section considers various possible future contexts provided by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

OECD reports on the theme of *Schooling for Tomorrow* (2001, 2003) consider networking in the context of three potential scenarios for schooling in the future:

- an unraveling of existing arrangements with either an extended and entrenched bureaucracy or greater market/choice-based solutions;
- shrinking public schooling because of teacher shortages accompanied by desperate proliferations of unsustainable innovations, or because of the growth of electronic learning systems; and
- re-schooling, in which schools become reinvented as focused learning organizations that develop learning in the context of the knowledge economy.

The reports contain a plethora of definitions, components, and qualities of networks, while also admitting that little consensus exists on definition. Two of the OECD definitions are considered below:

1. “The term “networking” refers to the systematic establishment and use (management) of internal and external links (communications, interaction, and co-ordination) between people, teams, or organizations (“nodes”) in order to improve performance. Key elements of this definition are:
  - systemic management
  - “nodes”: experts, teams, and institutions
  - “links”: communications, interactions, and co-ordination between nodes
  - performance improvement.
2. Dalin (1999) defined networks as “temporary social systems in which individuals can gain maximum informational gains with minimal effort.” (p348)

Perhaps more useful than the search for consensus in definition by the OECD are the various attempts to describe attributes or qualities of networks that make them of utility for organizational and professional learning. Van Aalst (2003) describes four advantages in networks:

- networks open access to a variety of sources of information;
- they offer a broader range of learning opportunities than in hierarchical organizations

- they promise a more flexible while more stable base for co-ordinated learning than does the anonymity of the market;
- they help to create and access tacit knowledge. (p35)

Attributes arguably more recognizable in and appropriate for an educational context were described by Hopkins (2003) in the following typology:

- At its most basic level, networks may be simply groups of practitioners joining together for a common purpose and sharing good practice.
- More ambitiously, networks can join together groups of teachers and schools joining together with the explicit aim of enhancing teaching and learning, not just of sharing practice.
- Networks can also serve not just the purpose of knowledge transfer and school improvement, but also join together groups of stakeholders to implement specific policies locally and possibly nationally.
- An extension of this way of working is found when groups of networks, within and outside of education, link together for system improvement in terms of social justice and inclusion.
- Finally, there is the possibility of groups of networks working together not just on a social justice agenda, but also as an explicit agency for system renewal and transformation.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At its most basic level, networks may be simply groups of practitioners joining together for a common purpose and sharing good practice.</li> <li>• More ambitiously, networks can join together groups of teachers and schools joining together with the explicit aim of enhancing teaching and learning, not just of sharing practice.</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: right;">– Hopkins</p>
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The OECD’s *Schooling for Tomorrow* reports consider a wide range of networking options as holding great promise to promote collaboration and teacher Professional Development, which they claim appears consistent across provincial and national boundaries. But there also exists clear evidence of fragility in many networks and collaborations, an area further explored in the later section of this paper on networks and collaborations outside of education. Impermanence of networks should not be confused with failure – networks are rarely permanent, more often established for a specific purpose, and should therefore fold and reform as different priorities emerge. Knowing when to end a network or a collaboration, therefore, appears equally

important as knowing when to start or to continue it.

The utility of the OECD’s view and examination of networking is that it places the concept within various futuristic contexts. Its weakness is that it fails to link to an existing literature on teacher networks, perhaps best explored by Lieberman & Grolnick (1997), who concluded:

*“Our look across networks helps us to understand their strong contextual nature, their infinite variety of purpose and character, and their similar organizational tensions. Regardless of their individual differences, they appear to have in common the ways in which they bring people together and organize their work: agendas that are more often challenging than prescriptive; learning that is more indirect than direct; formats for work more collaborative than individualistic;*

*attempts at change more integrated than fragmented; approaches to leadership more facilitative than directive.” (p213)*

There appears to be a greater sense of collegial, practitioner-controlled sharing implied in Lieberman & Grolnick’s work than in much of the OECD literature, which implies a greater managerial control of networks. Thus there may be significant differences in networks depending on the locus of control. Making the implied overt might be a basis for clarifying the form and nature of networks.

*“Our look across networks helps us to understand their strong contextual nature, their infinite variety of purpose and character, and their similar organizational tensions. Regardless of their individual differences, they appear to have in common the ways in which they bring people together and organize their work: agendas that are more often challenging than prescriptive; learning that is more indirect than direct; formats for work more collaborative than individualistic; attempts at change more integrated than fragmented; approaches to leadership more facilitative than directive.”*

– Lieberman & Grolnick

In order to develop effective networks, alliances, or collaborations, it may be important to build on existing knowledge from a variety of sources – within the traditional education literature, from organizations such as the OECD, and from sources not usually accessed by educational researchers. The next section examines one such source – the literature on collaboration and alliances from the world of business.

## **Networks and collaborations in business**

The world of business has some useful and relevant literature to contribute to understanding the pragmatics of collaboration. While the education literature largely conceptualizes the ideas, the business literature often offers pragmatic approaches that make collaborative ventures more likely to be successful. It may be productive for teacher unions to consider and adapt some of these approaches within an educational context.

The concept of “strategic alliances” has been discussed in a business context by Gulati & Gargiulo (1998), who argue that collaboration across organizations can be highly productive, enabling individual organizations to benefit more through the collaboration than through an individual approach. Linden (2002) describes a world where barriers separating organizations are crumbling:

*“The walls and lines separating organizations from one another, separating public from private sector, separating agencies from their customers and clients, are certainly blurring – if not coming down altogether. This is one of the most powerful and fascinating stories of our new organizational society.” (p11)*

In a later work, Linden (2003) explores the notion of collaborative leadership that he argues is becoming more relevant in work environments with flattened hierarchies and increased use of information technology. He offers eleven tasks for collaborative leaders that build relationships and capacity while avoiding individual credit. His concept is the capacity and growth of the group rather than that of the individual. But he also articulates four key qualities of effective collaborative leaders:

- tremendous persistence and energy and resolve with limited egos;
- passion about the outcome which attracts others, but “because the passion is about the outcome and not about their resume, they tend to build trust and goodwill”;
- ability to pull (encourage, invite) rather than push (order or pressure), in part because they have no formal hierarchical authority;
- capacity to think systemically, understanding interconnections in complex systems and how other organizations work.

*“The walls and lines separating organizations from one another, separating public from private sector, separating agencies from their customers and clients, are certainly blurring – if not coming down altogether. This is one of the most powerful and fascinating stories of our new organizational society.”*

– Linden

Linden’s view of collaboration is that of a dynamic, fluid, and collective focus on an end which is not individualistic but collective, not personal but focusing on a goal or a task in which all the collaborators have an investment and a motivation to achieve. Yet his exploration of leadership qualities suggests that collaborations often have strong yet non-charismatic leadership in which individuals initiate, encourage, and sustain leadership over time. Linden therefore balances the individual and the collective, reminding us that groups often require skills and strengths from

individuals to make the group functional and effective.

“Strategic alliance” was defined by Bartling (1998) as “a co-operative arrangement among two or more entities that combine their respective strengths to achieve compatible objectives while they retain their individual identities and share in the risks and rewards.” Some teacher unions are also using the term “strategic alliances” in their consideration of potential collaborations (AFT, 2001).

Many authors also explore strategic alliances and collaborations because they have been found to be increasingly necessary and because many fail (Parise & Sasson, 2002; Koza & Lewin, 2000). The literature on strategic alliances uses language similar to a more personal strategic alliance also prone to failure – marriage – with consideration of four terms: trust, commitment, control, and learning. A useful exploration of these themes can be found in the work of Inkpen & Currall (2004). They argue for evolution in trust and processes over time, with varying levels of formal monitoring depending on initial trust levels – the greater initial trust, the less need for formal monitoring. Trust, they argue, is also related to risk, whether relational (a partner’s opportunistic actions serving the individual organization rather than the collaboration); or in terms of capacity (the ability of each partner to fulfill its obligations). During the evolution of projects there is a trade-off between trust and control, whether formally or informally. Evolution is often identified within phases, with an initial “honeymoon” period, followed by a high-risk period if trust is weak. If the second phase is survived, then risk of failure is reduced.

Cullen, Johnson, & Sakano (2000) explore what they term the “soft side” of alliances, namely the development and management of the relationship developing during the alliance. They describe “credibility” trust (whether a partner has the intent and ability to meet commitments) and “benevolent” trust (the belief that a partner will act in good faith). While separating the terms “trust” and “commitment”, they argue that both are crucial to effective alliances for two reasons. The first is that contracts or other formal agreements can never cover the contingencies that will arise. The second is that any partnership between companies or organizations creates a strong potential for



dysfunctional conflict and mistrust. Cullen *et al*'s exploration of learning during alliances involves the sharing of "tacit" knowledge, which includes:

*"skills, capabilities, and ways of doing things which are part of the organization's culture. Tacit knowledge is not written down and people are often unaware of its exact nature."*

They also argue for reduced formal, contractual processes and improved personal relationships to ensure effective partnership, offering eight "essential factors" to enable partners to build trust and commitment, which include understanding reciprocity, mutual benefits, and an understanding of cultural differences. While the latter is focused on cultural differences in international alliances, the concept could also be applied to promoting cultural understanding between organizations in the same city or province but with quite different organizational cultures, such as unions and school district management.

Wallace (2004) explores two methods and models for building trust. In the aptly if unimaginatively-named "Trust-building" model he stresses compatible values, "gut feeling", process engagement, and on-going communication. In this model, Wallace is arguing for using instinct, but also for taking steps to engage and consider the relationship during the engagement while also taking some opportunities and risks in terms of communication. In the "Know Yourself" model, Wallace promotes exploration of what each partner knows (and does not know) about self and the partner, or their respective organizations, in terms of "sweet spots", "blind spots", and "danger zones" – a kind of reality check and communication about "good news and bad news" to see what is viewed commonly or differently by those involved in the collaboration. By such exploration, dialogue and disclosure build trust. Wallace also warns that building trust can be more complicated when issues of race, ethnicity, and gender are involved.

The business literature on collaborations and strategic alliances' greatest strength and applicability for teacher unions lies in the discussion of planning, maintaining, and supporting relationships in collaboration between people working in different organizations. While much of the work focuses on capitalist business enterprises, the focus on building trust and commitment in a pragmatic relationship has much to offer to educators who are considering how to work across organizations, in collaborations which involve teacher unions, school district management, universities, and community organizations, all with very different cultures and often with different ways of seeing the world. Another thread in the business literature on alliances and collaborations stresses that in effective collaborations, partners learn from each other, with such learning increasing understanding and respect, hardly a negative in a fractious educational world that sorely needs greater levels of understanding and respect.

There is some evidence that the concept of collaborations and alliances is becoming more common in public sector organizations (Linder & Brooks, 2004; Linden, 2002) as public sector organizations increasingly find it difficult to achieve desired ends without some form of collaboration.

# Connecting the threads for a future fabric: teacher union support for Professional Development, collaborations, and networks

This paper started with a question: Whether one teacher union's collaborative research strategy could be used as a basis for supporting teachers' Professional Development. The discussion of Professional Development considered a limited but current contextual and conceptual exploration of the nature and scope of Professional Development. This could be described as changing notions of Professional Development for changing times, but with a key focus on Professional Development that was collaborative and collegial. The next section updated earlier work (Naylor, 1997, 2001), considering teacher union roles in research and Professional Development. The section considering the OECD *Schooling for Tomorrow* documents examined the OECD perspective that networking and collaboration would become a norm in future schooling within several potential contexts of schooling provision. Finally, the section on networking and alliances outside of education considered whether learning from networking experiences in the world of business had utility in the world of education.

In attempting to answer the initial question, the literature examined above has provided some awareness of contexts, models, and approaches to both Professional Development and collaboration/networking in a time of rapid economic and social change, with potentially different forms of schooling and changing notions of teacher professionalism predicted for the future. Exploration of the literature allows a teacher union, or any organization, not only to consider forms of Professional Development suited to its ethos and preferences, but also to build credibility by linking its preferences to the current literature on Professional Development, and making a reasoned case for building approaches and services based on such analysis. Such credibility is necessary to engage both members in union-led Professional Development and external agencies in potential collaboration. But it may also be necessary for teacher unions to critically evaluate such literature and not blindly adhere to one strand or theme without careful analysis and debate.

Any consideration of the future should also be grounded in the present. In this paper, consideration of the present includes a focus on three existing projects in which the B.C. Teachers' Federation is collaborating with external agencies. Such experiences are briefly described below.

## **Collaboration 1: A federally-funded research project with several universities and school districts in two Canadian provinces. Research project title: "From Literacy to Multiliteracies: Designing knowledge frameworks for the new economy."**

The teacher union (BCTF) is a formal partner in this federally-funded Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) research project. The partnership (with the University of British Columbia and the Vancouver School Board as B.C.-based partners) was initiated by one faculty member at the B.C.-based university, who invited the BCTF to participate. The project was of interest to the union because it involved academic researchers whose work and approach were respected by the union. There had been

previous connections between union staff and UBC faculty but no previous formal partnership or collaboration in research or Professional Development. The project, exploring forms of literacy required to develop educated citizens in post-industrial economies, involved elementary and secondary school teachers from two large metropolitan school districts (Vancouver, BC, and another in Ontario), with the school district also a partner in the research. While the academic, university-based faculty drafted the research proposal, all partners were consulted and had input to the drafting.

In B.C., formal approval of the collaboration was made by the union and school district prior to the submission of the proposal to the funding body. The local unions within the school district were invited to consider approving the proposal and to offer recommendations to the research team. While the local secondary-teacher union did not participate in discussions, the elementary-school-teachers'-association (VESTA) Executive asked for and received a presentation on the proposal (presented by the university professor and the central teacher union representative), which was debated and formally approved. The local union requested that all the 3,000+ teachers in their local be both informed of the project and given the opportunity to apply to participate. This initially alarmed the partners, although the local assured them that in their view very few teachers would apply to participate. Should larger numbers than expected apply, it was accepted that some form of selection process would take place, in which the local union might also be involved.

Both central and local unions were supportive of the proposal because it encouraged teachers to become active partners in reflecting on their practice, rather than being a project in which outside researchers used teachers as data sources rather than as co-researchers. Teachers were able to co-write Case Studies or to offer local conference presentations, should they so choose, but they were not required to do so, as principal responsibility for writing was allocated to Graduate Research Assistants (GRA) enrolled in the university's PhD program, who also present at conferences, as do the academic partners. The central union's researcher and main union contact for the project enrolled in the UBC PhD program after the project started and therefore combined both partner representative and GRA roles.

Part of the initial participation and planning depended highly on the history of personal contact between individuals in different organizations, but also involved some knowledge of how each organization functioned. With the project drawing to its close after almost three years, the collaboration has involved some 50 educators, mainly elementary and secondary classroom teachers, but also Resource teachers (supporting inclusive education) and Speech Language Pathologists. Case Studies are currently being written in which teacher "claims" about new literacy practices are collaboratively explored and documented, and the project's web site, when fully developed, will enable teachers to post information about their approaches so that other teachers can access them.

### **Collaboration 2: A project in one province to support "Teaching to Diversity" in three school districts, with a focus on web-based information for teachers.**

In 2002 the teacher union initiated a large-scale research project in two school districts to consider effects on inclusive education resulting from government changes to funding

and contracts. Forty-five reports were produced<sup>2</sup> by a team of teacher-researchers and central union staff, including enrolment and demographic data; district history in terms of Special Education, Learning Assistance, and ESL provision; Case Studies of schools and roles within schools; Focus Group reports with classroom/support teachers, and a survey of close to 400 teachers in both districts. With 43% of teachers stating that they felt unprepared to teach to the diversity in their classrooms, and to address the considerable exodus of experienced teachers from the Special Education, Learning Assistance, and ESL support roles, the union developed a new web page, “Teaching to Diversity<sup>3</sup>,” to improve access to information about teaching strategies, adaptations, provincial policies, Professional Development, and a range of other information related to supporting students with diverse needs. Developing this site necessitated extensive internal collaboration among central union staff (Research, Graphics, Communication, Information Services) and between the union and its specialist teacher groups in Special Education, Learning Assistance, and ESL.

While the web site has been well received, the union also wanted to promote forms of teacher inquiry and Professional Development that might link to or be posted on the web page. District management in both districts where the initial research took place were approached by the union and asked if they would have an interest in joint sponsorship and support for possible teacher inquiry groups. A third district in the north of the province was approached to join the project in order to make the selected districts better reflect the range of communities in the province. All three school districts accepted, and the following groups were formed:

- a book study group to discuss the on-line book *Universal design for learning*<sup>4</sup>;
- mentoring/professional conversation groups for teachers new to Special Education/Learning Assistance and ESL support roles (one group in each district);
- an inquiry group exploring Picture Communication Symbols as a pedagogical tool in inclusive classrooms;
- an inquiry group considering how to make Individual Education Plans (IEPs) more accessible and useful to classroom teachers.

The teacher union’s approach was to present the idea of collaboration and the general theme, to offer some funds, training, as well as staff time for facilitation, and support, and to ask both local teacher associations’ PD Chair and district management representative to agree on specific areas of focus within the general theme which matched local management and union priorities, so that the work might fit within existing plans but receive extra support from both the district and the union. For the central union, this approach required preliminary discussion with the local teacher association, and some consideration of how PD funds were allocated in each district.

Approximately 60 teachers are participating in these projects. Teacher union staff who had accessed training in mentoring support offered their capacity to support the mentoring groups in the three districts. Some of the groups have discussed their progress in a union-sponsored pilot videoconference link where all three projects will connect, the discussion being recorded and used in part for further reflection and evaluation.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.bctf.ca/education/InclusiveEd/ResearchProject/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.bctf.ca/TeachingToDiversity/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.cast.org/teachingeverystudent/ideas/tes/>

Comments from teacher-participants<sup>5</sup> about their experiences in the mentoring/professional-conversation project included statements that the experience had been:

- *a great opportunity for professional development which was specific to teachers providing student support services in schools.*
- *a wonderful, collegial experience.*
- *enlightening...It also became clear that one of the most effective ways to provide professional development is by teachers helping and sharing with other teachers. Teachers know what they need and are well able to help meet those needs for their colleagues.*
- *stressful (initially) in that I felt overwhelmed by all there was to do in the job but then calming in that it focussed me and gave me a clear outline as to the job expectations.*
- *extremely worthwhile, and I see it as the beginning of my own ongoing professional development in terms of serving my school effectively.*
- *very helpful, practical, useful, positive.*
- *collaborative (I feel I have people I can contact), necessary! (I don't know if I would have survived), supportive, efficient (excellent use of time and money), just the beginning, I will remain involved in the project as long as it continues.*

One project involving the Picture Communication Symbols inquiry group has also connected with researchers with an identical focus in the first area of collaboration, the Multiliteracies research project, with a workshop where the facilitator's time and travel costs were paid by the union, and the "home group" time was provided by the school district. At the time of writing, one local/district is planning a "Sharing Evening" where each group will share their progress and learning, inviting a panel of union and district representatives to comment on and critique their presentations.

### **Collaboration 3: Teacher-union collaboration with community organizations with a focus on inclusive education, and subsequent union participation in a "National Summit on Inclusive Education."**

Relationships between teacher unions and community organizations with an interest in Inclusive Education have traditionally been problematic and occasionally tense in the province of British Columbia. Many such groups, advocating for children with exceptionalities in public schools, were critical of some teachers' attitudes towards inclusion, teachers' capacity and knowledge of appropriate strategies, and often considered teacher unions' contracts, which limited class size and composition, as constraining opportunities for students with exceptionalities. When the union approached provincial community organizations with a view to developing improved dialogue and understanding, they agreed to meet but with considerable suspicion of the union, especially as the initial meetings coincided with the commencement of teacher bargaining.

Four years later, the monthly meetings continue, and much of the initial suspicion has evaporated. Two unions, the BCTF and the Canadian Union of Public Employees –

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<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Nanaimo teachers and mentors/professional-conversation group-facilitators Tricia McKay and Maureen Hancock for collecting and reporting teacher-participant perspectives.

CUPE (the union representing the majority of Special Education Assistants in the province) – participate, along with approximately 12 provincial community organizations reflecting a range of advocacy and support groups, including those with a focus on Community Living, Learning Disabilities, Autism, Deaf/hard of hearing, and Adoptive Parents. Activities have included seminars on issues such as accountability practices and their impact on students with special needs. Workshops have been provided at teacher and community conferences, with union and community organization staff co-presenting. But, and possibly most important, the representatives have listened to and learned from each other as they collectively seek to find ways to offer supports which can make more-inclusive education the societal and educational norm. This does not mean that there is universal agreement on all issues, but there is dialogue and debate around areas of contention.

Teacher-union engagement in this group led to a national community organization inviting the BCTF as a provincial union (and the national Canadian Teachers' Federation) to participate in an Advisory Committee for the National Summit on Inclusive Education<sup>6</sup>, held in Ottawa in November, 2004. Of all the invited organizations (teacher unions, universities, school districts, provincial governments, and ministries), and excluding the hosts, Canadian teacher unions were the best represented, with most provincial teacher unions present. The BCTF co-authored a Discussion Paper with the host organization concerning future directions, and is part of a group considering collaborative future steps, including application for federal funding for further web development and knowledge mobilization activities.

There are still tensions between teacher unions and community organizations, some of which became overt at the National Summit. Others are less overt, but stem from considerable distrust of teacher unions from segments of community organizations. While the organizations continue their collaboration, there may be a need to address the tensions that may limit the effectiveness of collaboration in the future, perhaps through effective conflict-resolution processes.

In summary, the three collaborations involved several school districts, universities, and community organizations, with substantial time commitment by the union and its partners over several years. The projects have enabled relationships and trust to be developed over time, with increased understanding of organizational strengths, differences, and constraints, enabling joint planning and support for research as well as for on-going dialogue and shared presentations. The projects provide a base of experience, data as essential as the findings from the various strands of literature, from which we as a teacher union might consider options for the future. Some of these options will be explored in the following section.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.cacl.ca/english/natconf/2004/conferencesummary.html>

# Teacher union support for collaboration in supporting teacher Professional Development: Where to from here?

This section incorporates analysis of the literature and lessons learned from our experiences in the three collaborations discussed above, and offers eight possible directions or approaches for teacher unions to consider.

- **Teacher unions need to be aware of shifting societal, schooling, and professional contexts, and should be ready to adapt to meet changing professional needs of teachers.**

Various reports and publications referenced in this paper (OECD, 2001, 2003, 2004; Hargreaves, 2003) have considered the changing nature of societies in both economic and social terms, and the nature and potential of schooling within the context of such change. AFT reports (1992, 2001) have considered the changing demographics of teaching and the actual or potential demands of a new generation of teachers for professionally-oriented support from their teacher unions. As membership demographics, economies, and societies change, the structures and programs of teacher unions might be reviewed and redirected in order to provide effective professional support services to members. Keeping abreast of the range and direction of societal and schooling shifts allows for forward-looking planning processes, and will attract teachers who are also keeping abreast of new developments to participate in teacher unions' approaches to professional support.

It is difficult to keep abreast of literature and trends without participating in conferences, forums, and other collegial activities, in which teacher unions might share their perspectives and analyses. Co-presenting with university, school district, or community organization personnel provides collaborative space for the exploration of ideas, roles, and structures, and in terms of how cross-organizational collaboration might support student learning and teachers' work.

- **Accessing the literature on Professional Development allows for a reasoned case to be made for teacher unions' promotion of specific types of Professional Development.**

The areas for emerging and preferred Professional Development identified by Randi & Zeichner (2004) might form a useful starting point for debate within teacher unions concerning the types of Professional Development that unions might support. While there is no reason to focus too narrowly, it also seems feasible that Canadian teacher unions might develop ways of supporting forms of Professional Development that match teacher preferences for styles of Professional Development that include extended conversations and reflection with peers. Interestingly, all the directions identified by Randi & Zeichner match the directions being developed by the B.C. Teachers' Federation's pilot projects in three school districts and locals, suggesting a close match between one teacher union's preferences and at least one prominent analysis of the literature. Such a match, while helpful for identifying the preferred kinds of Professional Development support, also allows for a wide range of activities. It is therefore supportive, not prescriptive, defining starting points rather than imposing boundaries. It is also inherently collaborative, either

in the nature of the activities such as Study Groups, or in the joint sponsorship and support of projects by teacher unions and school districts. Collaborative support and evaluation of projects might also lead to improved sustainability – with some evidence supporting the claim that foundations are stronger and greater resources accrue to the collaboration when both management and union are supportive.

Analysis of some U.S. union participation in Professional Development (Urbanski, 2003; AFT, 2003) suggests there may be significant differences between philosophies and likely directions of U.S. and Canadian teacher unions. Unions to the south with a focus on union-supported Professional Development appear to have bought in to the rhetoric of “standards and quality”, linking much PD to student achievement. A preferred focus for teacher unions in Canada might be to link PD to student learning, considering the educative process in a wider frame than achievement, often narrowly measured in standardized tests. This is not merely a pedantic difference – narrow focus on achievement has narrowed approaches to teaching, and a link to achievement in PD may also narrow the range of Professional Development, reducing its potential richness to a technocratic rather than a professional experience, another form of deficit approach to staff development as discussed by Randi & Zeichner (2004).

- **Teacher union capacity and credibility is enhanced by internal collaboration and by collaboration with external agencies.**

While accessing the literature is important, it is also useful to learn from experience, perhaps considering such experience within the context of the literature. Aspects of the BCTF’s approaches in the three projects described have been enhanced by various internal collaborations, both in terms of staff and in terms of working with members. Working with staff has resulted in technical, graphic, and web-development support, as well as support for communication with members. One internal collaboration adapted a union mentoring program to a job-specific area, using existing knowledge in a non-traditional way. Working with members with subject-specialized knowledge has allowed web content to be developed that is of utility to teachers. Teacher unions may not be optimally using the human resources within their staff and membership, but by building better internal collaborations they might build on their existing human capital.

Working with outside agencies has allowed each agency to utilize the “tacit knowledge” (Van Aalst, 2003; Cullen *et al*, 2000) of their own structures and organizations to ease access and facilitate participation of external agencies. Examples of this include insider knowledge of central and local union structures and personnel, so that the central union supports and in some cases acts as a broker and/or a buffer between local teacher associations and the non-union partner. Such tacit knowledge reduces the risk of conflict by being present, and by being aware of sensitive issues and practices, flagging them to external partners. Similarly, union participants in collaboration have learned of external structures and processes.

But more important than avoiding conflict is the utility and capacity of management and union engaged in constructing and supporting Professional Development of interest to teachers, focused on student learning, and actively involving district staff and management. Both utility and capacity are enhanced by a focus and a process agreed to by both management and union without coercion or pressure. By fitting the focus into existing local priorities, the union builds credibility by its support for local priorities. For



the central union, the key demand is for a form of Professional Development that is teacher-led, collegial, and reflective. For each district, the need is to address current priorities. Thus both union and management needs are met, fitting well in the Strategic Alliance literature's view of alliances supporting (hopefully enlightened) mutual self-interest (Bartling, 1998; Parise & Sasson, 2002). As the partnerships evolved, there has been increased trust, with less formal monitoring (Inkpen & Currall, 2004).

- **Teacher unions might develop their own forms of learning communities which might offer an alternative to prescriptive and directive frameworks for Professional Development.**

In critiquing the promotion of types of learning communities described by Dufour (2005), it is also necessary to learn from them. Teacher unions may have greater affinity for concepts that allow for adaptation than they have for prescriptions that they are forced to swallow. The concept of collegial and reflective Professional Development, whether in networks or in teacher research/teacher study groups, is a form of PD that most teacher unions can support. Randi & Zeichner's (2004) distinction between "staff" and "professional" development gives teacher unions an impetus to support the latter, and their identification of the four kinds of Professional Development offers a focus for considering specific approaches that unions might develop or extend. These build on professionalism and respect the capacity of teachers to direct their own Professional Development.

Developing a form of learning community appropriate for teachers has occurred in some of the pilot projects described above, but we need to learn more about where they have met (or failed to meet) teachers' needs. Data are being collected, and discussions are being held with participants to review the kind of experience and the form of learning community developed. Initial discussions and data collection indicate that they have developed collaborative focus and discussion (Hargreaves, 2003), and that their discussions have taken place over time. Yet they also appear idiosyncratic and "individual", in that each group appears to develop its own style, dynamics, and approach. One common factor reported by those teachers in the projects is that this form of collegial experience has been lacking for most participants for some time, and that until the union proposed and supported this kind of Professional Development, it had rarely occurred. Another factor is the active participation of district management in some of the groups' planning and reflections. In one district, facilitators for three PD groups have met with district staff, local union Professional Development Chairs, and central union staff to share learning from the experience of the projects. Such discussions have become richly reflective but also of utility in planning and sharing information about approaches and processes. Supporting facilitators and developing facilitation skills also builds teacher leadership and capacity in Professional Development.

It may also be possible to use the experiences of those building professional learning communities and adapt them to form learning communities for use in a range of contexts – urban and rural schools, subject-based networks, job-specific approaches. The strength of a teacher union lies in knowing some of these contexts, and potentially building learning communities around them. There is also the capacity of teacher unions to link teachers across districts, which district management might find more difficult. Teacher unions should work to their strengths by defining and building learning communities across sites and districts.

- **Teacher unions should learn about collaboration from sources other than just the education literature.**

This initial foray into the world of business was somewhat tentative for a teacher union researcher. But lessons have been learned. The first is the essential pragmatism of business; that alliances are important to achieve what you cannot achieve alone. Put another way, if a business can reach desired targets without external partnership, there is no reason to partner. That's the logic for partnering, or not. In the emerging context of a post-industrial western world, with major shifts in organizational change, leadership, knowledge management, networking, and governance, businesses are increasingly finding they cannot survive and thrive without some form of partnership or alliance. Put within an educational context, the OECD (2003) argues that educators need similar alliances and networking in order to meet student needs in emerging post-industrial economies and societies.

Unions have traditionally been associated with industrial economies, and criticized for thinking in outmoded, industrial ways. By accessing literature outside of the education sector, teacher unions can keep abreast of shifts and changes in areas like organizational change, knowledge management, and mobilization. They can incorporate some of this thinking into their own organizations and programs. In the literature described above, we can learn about cross-organizational collaboration, in terms of building trust, co-management, and cross-cultural differences. Unions can “get out more” (Rodrigue, 2000), in the sense of accessing ideas and learning from sources other than the traditional. As the world changes, unions need to know about and to access more diverse sources of information, not simply to digest but to adapt, critique, and challenge. There is a need to take some risks and to build confidence – reading and learning from unfamiliar sources; debating and challenging from a position where teacher unionists accept roles as learners and critics. The latter we know all about; the former we need to think about more, for it essentially asks how a teacher union can genuinely become its own learning organization.

- **Documentation of our experience and analysis of the literature allows teacher unions to share learning with teachers and with actual or potential collaborators/partners.**

“Getting out more” also requires taking some risks with documenting and reflecting on our experience as teacher unionists supporting Professional Development. An organization which documents or explores its progress will be challenged from within its ranks, and from external sources, simply because it takes a risk by making overt statements and claims. Unions will be challenged for “sleeping with the enemy”, where adversarial memories are strong, and documenting and sharing information about the experience may not be welcomed in all quarters. Yet such documentation is essential, to develop and share conceptual understanding of more collaborative PD and PD structures; to understand the nature and processes of collaboration; to pass on learning to new facilitators and a new generation of teachers. It is crucial to build the collaborations, but actions should be followed by documentation, critiques, and analysis. This maximizes the sharing and dissemination capacity of teacher unions – we know how to disseminate through extensive communications systems and processes, but in terms of professional focus we have not yet learned what to share in terms of content.

Some of the areas of focus for documentation might include: forms and approaches to Professional Development; facilitation of action research and study groups; finding and maintaining partnerships with school districts and universities. More teachers could author papers and present at conferences, with financial support from their union. More teacher graduate students might focus on union Professional Development projects or interests for theses and dissertations, building capacity as individuals but also contributing to teacher unions' learning and capacity.

- **Teacher unions should develop cohorts of union-sponsored leaders who can promote, support, and write about/present union-led Professional Development.**

The literature on Professional Development and learning communities argues for non-hierarchical leadership (Sparks, 2002, 2005), which includes teacher and teacher union leadership. Notions of distributed leadership have been promoted by Elmore (2000), Supovitz (2000), and Neuman & Simons (2000), all described in Sparks (2002). As with other prescriptions reviewed in this paper, the concept of teacher-leader is ripe for adaptation and redefinition by teacher unions, but the basic concept is clear: that leadership can be that of ideas and action, that it can be teacher-led, and that it need not be hierarchical.

Teacher unions are superbly placed to support teacher leaders. Contextually, many mid- and late-career teachers in B.C. find there are few current options to classroom teaching. Many positions in curriculum development, subject area support roles, and other non-teaching jobs have disappeared under constant cutbacks. There exists a wealth of experienced teachers who could offer leadership in Professional Development, perhaps through facilitation of action research/study groups or other PD activities.

Teacher-union PD funds could be used in part to develop cohorts of teacher leaders with an explicit focus on Professional Development. Such cohorts could form their own learning communities, exchanging ideas and building skills and expertise. Teacher leaders, too, could publish reports and present at conferences teacher-union led or collaborative Professional Development. Newer and younger teachers could be encouraged to participate initially in teacher-research groups, but later in teacher leadership positions, thereby ensuring the evolution and continuation of teacher-union initiatives. This could be of particular importance at present, with large numbers of teachers in the province due to retire in the coming years.

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- **Teacher unions and their partners should consider how participating in collaborations supports student learning and teachers' work, and might potentially reduce conflict in education systems.**

While this paper has focused primarily on the role of teacher unions in supporting the Professional Development of teachers, it is crucial that some consideration be given to the role of partners. School districts and universities, with a few commendable

exceptions, have rarely initiated collaborations with teacher unions. Reactions to requests for collaborations from unions to districts have generally been fairly, if guardedly, received. Requests from universities to unions to engage in collaborations are rare, and sometimes limited to obtaining funds for the university rather than involving the union. But there have been a number of successful partnerships involving Canadian universities and teacher unions, and it is crucial to reflect on the nature of learning from the experience. Data from the current BCTF/UBC/Vancouver School Board SSHRC-funded project will assist such reflection.

Reflection on and improvement of partnerships may help to support current partnerships, but may also lead to improved relationships between organizations. As Cullen, Johnson, & Sakano (2000) explored the development and management of organizational relationships, so might teacher unions, school districts, and universities consider what they have learned from the experience, and whether increased trust (should it occur) might lead to better systemic relationships and reduced conflict between educational stakeholder organizations.

The challenge in collaboration affects all partners, and while teacher unions can play a major role in proposing and building partnerships, school districts and universities need to commit to and build collaborations. They, too, need to consider the qualities of collaborative leaders (Linden, 2003), how to build and maintain trust (Wallace, 2004), and how to build their part of collaborative learning communities. Future research might explore the perspectives and experiences of participants from the districts, union, and universities.

# Conclusion

The concepts of “collaboration” and “learning communities,” per se, are not the only solutions to supporting teachers’ work and Professional Development. There is no quick fix, no obvious remedy or prescription, because teachers’ work is not an ailment to be cured. Rather, it is an area where teacher unions and others need to build professional and respectful approaches to supporting good teaching, and to building professionalism through reflection and discourse, which are linked to improved students’ learning in the widest sense. Building union-initiated approaches to Professional Development, learning communities, and collaborations is a manageable and viable option for teacher unions.

There appears to be ample evidence, from the literature and from experience, that collaborations have a potentially important role to play in supporting teachers’ work and Professional Development. This exploration and analysis suggests that some collaborative approaches to Professional Development are philosophically close to unions’ ethos, yet have support in the current literature on collaboration and partnerships. Teacher unions might find or expand roles in collaborating with external agencies to build better Professional Development for teachers. This may require consideration of internal structures, staffing, and budgets. It will also require close consideration of context and

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contextual change; supporting specific approaches to Professional Development; training; and documentation, reflection, presentations, and publications. Collaboration can be internal, better utilizing existing union staff and structures, using the extensive skills of a highly-experienced teacher workforce, and building effective transitional supports for a new generation of teachers.

Collaboration can also be external, with active processes to include partners such as school districts, universities, and community organizations. It is possible to learn from and adapt approaches to Professional Development and to partnerships from literature within the educational community but it may be useful to explore sources such as business for better understanding of pragmatic approaches to partnership.

This paper has placed three examples of one union’s collaborative research work to date in a context which is intended to encourage consideration of whether these approaches have relevance and utility for the future of this union and its members as we consider teacher union support for the Professional Development of teachers in B.C.’s public schools.

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