

# Current Research and Practice on Learning Communities: What We Know, What are the Issues, and Where are We Going?

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**Abstract:** We envision building an ongoing, international research collaboration on learning communities (IRCLC) composed of researchers who are interested in studying LCs. Given this goal, the purpose of this workshop is to bring together active researchers who study LCs, in all their forms, to better understand the past, present, and future of this central theme in the learning sciences. The workshop will be structured following a LC model, so that norms of trust, collaboration, and multiple zones of participation can be developed, while members share their expertise and contribute to a collective knowledge-building process on LCs.

## Introduction

In recent decades, a socio-constructivist approach to learning has increasingly become relevant to education, reflected in the emergence of the learning sciences as a discipline (Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 2000). This shift in the recognition that learning does not take place only in one's mind, but is distributed (Salomon, 1993), has been translated into educational models that are profoundly different than traditional ways that teaching and learning have been practiced (Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999). Among these reconceptualized models, those that have focused on the community have received a great deal of attention, particularly when they were first studied in 1990's (e.g., Brown & Campione, 1994; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1994). We refer to these models as learning communities (LCs).

The attention that LCs received from learning scientists, as well as their promulgation within various educational settings like schools (e.g., Herrenkohl & Mertl, 2010; Hogan & Corey, 2001; Lehrer, Schauble, & Lucas, 2008; Rogoff, Turkianis, & Bartlett, 2001), universities (Hod & Ben-Zvi, 2013), informal settings (e.g., <http://www.computerclubhouse.org>) and more recently in online settings (e.g., Kafai & Fields, 2013; Resnick, et al., 2009), is reflected in academic journals and conferences. For example, a 2009 EARLI conference had the theme of "Fostering a Community of Learners," out of recognition that "learning is a social process of knowledge construction by collaborating with peers and teachers in communities of learners" (Rijlaarsdam, 2009, p. 5). Even this year's ICLS theme, *Learning and Becoming in Practice*, is at the heart of the LC approach due to its emphasis on enculturation (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989).

While there are many reasons to view the progress that has been made in research and practice on LCs positively, there are still voices of concern. Firstly, to this day only a relatively small number of LCs have been researched and replicated in practical settings. While there may be multifarious aspects above and beyond the learning sciences that inhibit this, one cannot rule out the lack of understanding or under-theorization as a potential factor. Second, although there has been a steady roll-out of articles and research published on LCs, they have hardly been the central theme of articles and conferences. A close look at the same EARLI conference shows there were no efforts to define, revisit or review what is known about LCs. Moreover, for example, in the past two learning sciences international conferences (CSCL 2013, ICLS 2012), the term LC, or one of its relevant equivalents, was a central theme or even loosely addressed in only a relatively small number of papers.

## Workshop Goals

Based on the enduring interest of the learning sciences community to explore the LC approach, we make a call with this proposal as a step towards re-invigorating LCs as a central theme of research. Moreover, we are interested in contemporary ways that LCs have been extended. We believe there is great work being done, and the goal of this workshop is to communicate these ideas around the organizing concept of LC theory and practice. As such, our pre-conference workshop will focus on the following questions:

- What is the current status of LC theory and practice?
- What exemplary learning community models exist today that still have yet to be shared but can make a contribution?
- What are current research agendas working on this and what are the key results?
- What interdisciplinary perspectives can contribute to what is known about LCs? How we create a new LC language based on the existing disciplinary languages?
- How is technology used to foster n LC? What are future technological directions?

## Expected Outcomes and Contributions

The workshop is organized around these four guiding questions that the participants will actively negotiate during the day's activities:

- *Who are we?* The purpose of this question is to build the social infrastructure of our international research collaboration on learning communities (IRCLC).
- *What are we interested in?* The purpose of this question is to encourage people to share ideas and elicit the major themes.
- *What are the emergent issues in researching LCs?* The purpose of this question is for the community to identify the issues that need to be developed and studied further.
- *Where do we want to go from here?* The purpose of this question is to reflect upon the day and make commitments (or explore possibilities) for future collaborations

We envision this workshop as the start of an ongoing, International Research Collaboration on Learning Communities (IRCLC) composed of researchers and visionaries who are interested in studying LCs. As an outcome of this research, we suggest publication of a book or special issue in a refereed journal that reports and synthesizes our emergent findings. We will use a collaborative internet platform to pool resources from different disciplines, connect research and practice in various domains, examine current and future challenges, and contribute to a solid research foundation that can significantly advance the field.

## Participation Modes

Participants include practitioners and researchers in all domains who are actively researching, are interested in researching, or want to learn more about the theory and design of LCs. This includes various settings (face-to-face, online, blended, classroom, school, professional, etc.), technologies that support LCs, as well as learning and teaching processes within LCs. The workshop includes two modes of participation: *key contributors* and *participants*.

*Key contributors* are those who actively research LCs in various forms. They will, in addition to being a full participant in the day's activities, lead an approximately 45 minute round-table about the research and design of their LC. Key contributors will also be asked to submit an abstract of their LC (or LC related idea) to enable participants to choose which round-table they will attend.

*Participants* will be selected based on their interest in participating in the workshop and experience with LCs. Participants will be expected to actively engage in the day's activities, contributing to the collective knowledge of the group. Participants with limited or no LC experience, who would like to come to learn, are encouraged to apply.

## Organizers

**Dr. Katerine Bielaczyc** is an Associate Professor and Director of the Jacob Hiatt Center for Urban Education at Clark University. Dr. Bielaczyc's research involves collaborating with students, teachers, and school communities to investigate new approaches to teaching and learning. Her work focuses on developing both technological and social infrastructures to support participants in working together as a knowledge building community to create knowledge regarding personal, pedagogical, and systemic transformation.

**Dr. Dani Ben-Zvi** has a lifetime of experience working with learning communities. He designs and studies technology-enhanced learning communities as means to make complex domains such as statistics and learning sciences more accessible to learners. For the past eight years, he has been the leader of the Educational Technologies Graduate Program in the University of Haifa. Currently, he leads a Research Excellence Center in Israel that examines learning in a networked society in interdisciplinary ways.

**Yotam Hod**, a doctoral student, has over 10 years experience working in and researching LCs. He has spent five years at a celebrated NYC public high school as an assistant principal, leading a community of learners. Yotam has researched a unique LC at the University of Haifa over the past five years, focusing on what social and clinical psychological theories of groups can explain about LCs.

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