

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE WITH VISITING SCHOLARS

Paul J. Magnuson, Özge Hacifazlıoğlu, Steven Carber and Rae Newman

ABSTRACT

A boarding school research center annually invites students, professors, and others to collaborate with faculty members, forming interconnected communities of practice. The authors interviewed visitors to determine how their experience contributed to their identity as a scholar and the extent to which they felt part of a community of practice. Categorizing emergent themes according to Wenger's (1998) categories of communities of practice, we identified six subthemes that characterize their experience. All participants valued their stay and expressed a desire to remain connected to the school, visiting scholars, and other people they met and now consider part of their network.

Keywords: Communities of practice; visiting scholars; high school; professional development; collaboration; networking

As teachers we are in a sense constantly building communities of learners at many levels, from students' paired work during a simple classroom activity to organized professional learning communities among faculties. Educators are often encouraged to make their schools learning organizations, which may sound odd to an outsider since what are schools if not learning organizations? Yet the sentiment makes sense to most educators, since many have perhaps experienced the creeping stagnation within a school that stops being a learning environment, where teachers may close their classroom doors, keep to themselves, and experience little professional talk in the teacher lounge. In fact, the structure of schooling may inadvertently contribute to the environment from being a non-learning one for teachers, as they are assigned to large classes and work on a

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packed schedule with little discretionary time. Further, teacher roles are defined by the hours spent teaching, which again may seem like common sense. Yet at a university level, it is clear that roles are defined more broadly, including, for example, research, networking, and further development of ideas.

A boarding school in Switzerland has over the last decade built the possibility for faculty members to engage, if they choose, in a learning environment that promotes and rewards involvement in academic scholarship related to teaching and learning. In the last six years, the activities of the school's faculty has been augmented by the development of a visiting scholar program, in which people from around the world stay at the school for an extended period of time to observe, collaborate, and work in the existing learning organization. The school promotes the program so that its teachers can rub shoulders with academics and connect with a steady stream of new ideas. In the process, the visiting scholars have come to learn that they, too, have much to learn from the school's teachers, and the resulting social and professional orbits have repeatedly coalesced into interesting and useful communities of practice.

Now, with an established record of success hosting visiting scholars and building the school's capacity for continuous professional development through collaboration, a deeper look at the experience of the visiting scholars is warranted. Defining the interaction of visiting scholars with each other and with the school's faculty members as communities of practice nicely describes an important aspect of the visiting scholar experience, both during and after their stay at the school.

CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND TO THE VISITING SCHOLAR PROGRAM

In an idyllic setting in a ski station in the Swiss Alps, 275 international students, aged 12 to 18, attend boarding school. The views from the classroom windows are magnificent and the opportunities for travel and winter sports are nothing short of amazing. Students study, ski, and tour Europe with friends from every corner of the world. The tagline on the school's original professional development website for its first in-house professional learning program was *Continually becoming the professionals we already are*. At the time, the research center didn't exist, though this first program remains one of several opportunities the research center now offers teachers. The idea at the time was to stop paying external experts to deliver one-shot professional development and to pay faculty members instead. Professional development changed from largely ineffective one-shot workshops to ongoing collaborative and classroom-based experiences. Thus, the school sent the message that faculty members were already professionals who should learn from and teach each other, who were worthy of being paid for their efforts, and that, although a boost from an outside source could be useful from time to time, the school's own teachers were the number one resource for professional expertise and school improvement.

Over the years, the number of programs and opportunities grew. A second program used classroom observations to inform teachers about the balance of teacher talk and student talk in their classes. The research center added professional development for the pedagogical use of technology, working with ESL students in mainstream classes, accommodating students with special needs, mindfulness, assessment, and more. Programs have come and gone depending on need, interest, and the availability of skilled lead teachers.

With the formal establishment of the center in 2013, the center's leader was given a boost in flexibility and credibility – and a generous operating budget. As was the case with the original program, when professional development funds were directed to the school's teachers instead of to outside experts, much of the budget was again directed to those faculty members who chose to be involved with the program. These teachers were called resident scholars. Resident scholars proposed year-long investigations into their own teaching or curriculum development, and if their projects were selected by school leadership, the resident scholar was paid a stipend and allocated a budget for expenses related to the project. In the early years resident scholars had to be recruited; five years into the program there were more applications than the budget could support, making the selection competitive and the overall quality of the projects arguably higher.

From resident scholars to visiting scholars was not a great jump. The school's first visiting scholar, a former international school administrator, interviewed faculty members and wrote about the IB program in Fall 2014. Simultaneously, he served as a proof of concept, and the visiting scholar program was launched the following academic year. The lure of a sabbatical in the Swiss Alps, coupled with free room and board for visitors, removed any major obstacles to begin receiving scholars from around the world. In 2019–2020, 20 visiting scholars collaborated on studies and articles, created curriculum, and offered return stays in their home countries, complete with school visits and conference presentations. In sum, the research center, having started with a single program for a handful of faculty members, had grown into what could be described, perhaps with just a little hyperbole, as a laboratory school or a small university functioning inside a grade 7–12 boarding school. Faculty members were teaching, of course, but also collaborating on research, traveling to present their work, and writing articles and book chapters, all while collaborating and networking with visiting scholars from around the world.

Loosely grouped by the type of activity, recent visiting scholars have participated in the following areas:

Curriculum projects: Design thinking, Linguistics, Place-based learning in the Alps, Simulations and Theater

Studies using LAS teachers and students as research participants: Cyber bullying, Pedagogical technology, Professional development observation tools, Translanguaging, and Robotics.

The small-town boarding school environment, with its wide range of activities stretching across the day with multiple shared meals in the cafeteria, brings people into the community very quickly. It's probably fair to say that visiting

scholars are more or less “adopted” by faculty members into the school community. Those visiting scholars who stay multiple weeks or make more than one visit (many do) tend to make individual friendships and find collaborative partners that transcend any particular project. They soon have independent connections among our faculty members and, not uncommonly, in the town as well.

In the early years of the program, the school scrambled for participants. Five years in, the demand by visiting scholars to stay at the school began to require advance booking to ensure that no more than two or three visiting scholars were on campus at one time. Furthermore, since many visiting scholars wanted to return a second or third time, the growing pool of collaborators created greater demand each year.

Finally, the program brought many reciprocal opportunities, initially with the director of the research center, but increasingly with other faculty members as well. Faculty members have made informal exchanges with visiting scholars by traveling to England, Spain, Russia, Taiwan, Turkey, and the United States. It is expected that this wider community of practice will grow as collaborative projects continue and additional visiting scholars spend time on campus.

LITERATURE REVIEW

We first introduce communities of practice as a framework for understanding the social nature of engaging in practice, reflection, and continuous improvement. Then we look at the extent to which visiting scholars are welcomed at institutions of learning to potentially expand and join communities of practice. We find that hosting visiting scholars is a common practice at the university level, but much less common at the high school level, mostly due to the reward structure of the two types of institutions but also, of course, due to factors such as tradition, inertia, and available time.

Communities of Practice

Wenger (1998) and Wenger et al. (2002) emphasize the value of creating communities of practice in which each member of the community is engaged in social practice with others in the community, creating a continuous loop of learning among members. Active interaction and cooperation enable teachers to develop a sense of belonging to specific practices and they learn new ways to collaborate and to enact the practice itself. Therefore, in this double loop process (Argyris, 1991), teachers co-construct their identities as both learners and practitioners (Clark et al., 2021). As Olson and Clark (2009) and Painter and Clark (2015), relying on Wenger (1998), put it:

...people construct and develop their identities and transform their thinking through their active participation and engagement with others in cultural-historical practices that are situated in social communities. Thus, members of a community of practice interact, share, and

participate in the creation and re-creation of the practice and, through that engagement, develop, reify, and transform their identities (p. 217).

Wenger (1998) identifies four components of learning: “Meaning, practice, community and identity”: (1) teachers and teacher educators talk about the *meaning* of their professional contexts, using reflection as a means of professional development; (2) teachers relate their views and experiences in the process of mutual engagement in actual *practice*, in which (3) teacher participation and commitment is recognizable as *community*. Finally, (4) teachers who are learning within communities of practice re-construct their *identity* as a teacher. This structure is based on social learning theory and provides the basis for establishing communities of practice in school settings. Each of the four interrelated components reinforces the others. This perspective is derived in an early study by Lave and Wenger (1991), underlying the importance of “shifting the analytic focus from the individual as learner to learning as participation in the social world” (p. 12).

Craig’s recent study (2020) on knowledge communities in teacher education recounts the shared experiences of five teachers and teacher educators in which collaborative professional development laid the groundwork for teacher growth in practice, leadership, and careers. Based on Schwab’s conceptualization of “best loved self,” Craig and her colleagues’ long-standing Portfolio Group serve as an example for knowledge communities that continually grow as they receive feedback from trusted friends and colleagues. As asserted by Clandinin et al. (1997), teachers are constantly growing as new knowledge and experience enrich their practical knowledge. From this perspective, the notion of communities of practice is based on reflective practices in which members are given the opportunity to self-reflect and reflect as a group through discussion of past experiences as they construct meaning for their present situations.

The research center creates a community of practice by hosting visiting scholars representing a broad spectrum of educators with different cultural backgrounds. The stories of visiting scholars, who range from individuals outside the field of education through graduate students and professors, highlight rarely seen perspectives on the journey of teaching. The Communities of Practice described in this study provide a safe and encouraging context for visiting scholars to reflect on their past experiences and articulate a conceptual synthesis of their own professional development.

Research and Teaching Priorities

The school’s faculty members are generally rewarded for being good at teaching classes. Additional professional rewards involve leading sports and clubs, and shouldering the duties associated with residential life supervision. University faculty members are rewarded through a combination of successful teaching, research, and outreach (securing grants, presenting, and collaborating with others). While a high school’s *raison d’être* is to teach course content, “knowledge creation, not just knowledge dissemination, is one of the fundamental roles of universities” (Rosowsky, 2020). Knowledge creation and outreach are in fact

stressed to the point that they can at times overshadow teaching responsibilities at the university, since research and service, in addition to teaching, are usually part of tenure decisions (Harris, 2019).

Faculty exchanges between universities support the built-in reward system of higher education and are therefore a manner of creating and supporting communities of practice among faculty members. This is much less the case at the secondary level, where full teaching loads comprise an overwhelming majority of a teacher's responsibilities. In K-12 environments, engagement with research is something usually done in professional development programs (if at all), or through the individual initiative of teachers, often propelled by a desire to complete a graduate degree. Their reward is the prestige of the degree and perhaps a change in salary and, hopefully, greater satisfaction as a professional. There is usually no expectation, however, that teachers continue to do research at the school. In fact, there is little time for research in the context of a busy teaching and extracurricular schedule.

Exchanges Between Educational Institutions

It is not surprising, then, that there is limited literature about visiting scholars at the high school level, while there is plenty at the university level. Heinz and Lewis (2009) describe a program at the University of Colorado at Boulder that invited over 60 visiting scholars over a six-year period to support student learning. To support faculty members, Shimmi (2014) argues that networking strengthens scholarship through the sharing of ideas. Others emphasize the importance of exchanging scholars to gain greater international understanding (Bano, 2020; Farrell, 1978; Guo-Brennan & Wei, 2012; Zhang, 2016). Visiting scholar programs at the high school level are less common, though there are programs that support teacher exchanges (AFS in your country, n.d.).

Well-Developed Visiting Scholar Programs at the K-12 Level

There are a few more fully developed visiting scholar programs at the high school level that look more like their university counterparts. For example, Park School in Baltimore, Maryland has a well-established visiting scholar program for visitors in certain domains, namely artists, journalists, and writers. The program's aim is to bolster the student experience. In their own words, "visiting scholars meet with students for discussions and workshops, in large and small groups, revealing worlds of excitement and possibility beyond the classroom" (Visiting Scholars, n.d.). The program reaches out to its own alumni, at least in part, creating specialized communities of practice that include hands-on student workshops and presentations. The program at the Leysin American School is also robust, with a multiyear history and several completed and ongoing projects, publications, and collaborations (Educational Research, n.d.).

It is perhaps worthwhile to establish a working definition of visiting scholar, since we have introduced a few types and purposes of visiting scholars and exchange programs in both secondary and tertiary institutions. We define visiting

scholars as individuals working in education or interested in education who are not employed by the host school but who visit it, often for an extended period, and who experience some degree of integration into the host community through the activities they are involved in while on site, whether teaching, writing, conducting research, developing curriculum, or some other pursuit. This study shares experiences of visiting scholars and the ways in which creating and being part of a community of practice shape their identity as scholars and teachers.

METHODOLOGY

Design

In this study, reports of experiences of visiting scholars, who have all spent time visiting the same high school, were analyzed using a phenomenological design qualitative research methodology. The goal of the study is to “illuminate the specific, to identify phenomena through how they are perceived by the actors in a situation” (Lester, 1999, p. 1). We selected 10 visiting scholars from the pool of all visiting scholars who visited the school in the last six years, deliberately choosing individuals with a variety of backgrounds and experiences. We then interviewed them about their experiences as visiting scholars.

Data Collection

We arranged remote, face-to-face interviews with former (and in one case, current) visiting scholars. Each prospective interviewee received an invitation letter explaining the research and listing the questions we intended to ask. Each interviewer followed a simple set of guiding questions as prompts, allowing the conversation to take its course after each prompt. Interviews lasted from 45 minutes to well over an hour. Interviews were recorded and transcribed and/or notes were taken during the interview. In one case, a participant with whom we had trouble setting an interview time sent responses to the question prompts by email.

Participants

Participants lived on campus for stays that ranged from several days to nearly two months, between Fall 2016 and Spring 2020. Participant ages range from their twenties to their sixties, and their backgrounds include small business owners, teachers, graduate students, and seasoned professors. They represent five nationalities (American, British, Icelandic, Russian, and Turkish) working in seven different countries (Australia, Finland, Iceland, Spain, Turkey, and the United States) (Table 1).

Their motivations to visit the school varied. One researcher prepared a specific study and collected data during her stay. Two individuals came to observe existing programs in which they were interested. Some visiting scholars came with no particular agenda other than completing their own work – a sabbatical, more

Table 1. Visiting Scholar Demographics.

	Position	Teaching Experience NA, New (1–5 years), Experienced	Home Institution	# of Stays at the School
1	Researcher	NA	MIT, USA	1
2	Professor	Experienced	University of Iceland	1
3	Professor	Experienced	University of Iceland	1
4	Consultant	Experienced	Self-employed, USA	5
5	Graduate Student	NA	City, University of London	1
6	Recent PhD holder	Experienced	In transition, maternity leave	3
7	Small business owner	Experienced	(name withheld for anonymity), Spain	1
8	Teacher	New	College de l'Humanité, Switzerland	1
9	PhD Candidate	Experienced	Adjunct Faculty, (name withheld for anonymity), Turkey	1
10	Researcher	Experienced	JAMK University of Applied Sciences, Finland	1

or less – but during their time on campus participated in curriculum writing, teaching, and program advising. Most visiting scholars in this study were only at the school once, though one made three visits and one made a total of five visits, the first visits as a paid consultant. They represented diverse fields, including teacher education, sociology, environmentalism, language instruction, alternative education, and economics.

Data Analysis

The interviews were first transcribed. Written transcripts of the responses to the semi-structured interviews were then color-coded by one of us, by reading each interview and highlighting themes that seemed most important to the interviewee. After coding all interviews, seven strong common themes emerged, which expanded to 12 after a second reading of all 10 transcripts, and which was then pared down to six by combining themes that were similar enough that it was difficult to delineate where a particular comment best fit. For example, while themes of having a “rewarding” stay and a “productive” stay were originally classified as separate categories, they were later merged. The iterative process of returning to previously coded interviews to add or combine themes helped form a summary of the visiting scholar experience, which is an amalgamation of all the experiences, though we also provide quotes and examples from specific visiting scholars. This is not to say that the experience is the same for all visiting scholars – that is not the case. But it does identify commonalities across most visiting scholars’ experiences.

The first compilation of the emerging sub-themes was shared with the other researchers who had interviewed visiting scholars to check whether the amalgamated description of the visiting scholar experience corresponded to their impressions and notes from the interviews they had conducted. Comments from those researchers were integrated into the results. We then analyzed the extent to which the themes we discovered in the interviews fit in the framework proposed by Wenger, cross walking his four components: meaning, practice, community, and identity, with the themes – now more properly called subthemes, that we discovered in the interviews. As Wenger notes, the areas overlap and mutually support one another, so we were not surprised to see that, when mapped to Wenger's four areas, a single theme of ours could arguably fit in two, or even three or four, areas. It is perhaps easiest to see the relationships in a cross tabulation of Wenger's four areas of communities of practice and the six sub-themes that emerged in the analysis of the interviews of the visiting scholars. As mentioned, these components of communities of practice are not discrete and each reinforces the other.

FINDINGS: EXPERIENCES OF VISITING SCHOLARS

The communities of practice described in this study provided visiting scholars with opportunities to reflect on the process of co-creating communities of practice and on the content of their own interests and work while at the school. The 10 visiting scholars are earnest professionals, bound together by an interest in education and the physical setting of a boarding school in the Swiss Alps. They either sought a connection with the school or were recruited by the school, or, in one case, recruited by another visiting scholar. They came to the school with a general desire to share their expertise with the school's faculty members, whether through a particular agenda (i.e., a pre-arranged research study) or through presenting their fields and interests in classes or presentations. They also came prepared to learn from the school, though what they were going to learn might not have been apparent to them before they arrived. For example, visiting scholars with little international school exposure tended to comment more about the international nature of the school community and how its members interact. As one would expect, the business owner and the consultant focused on different learnings (school operations and new ways of thinking, respectively) than did those who worked on research and curriculum development, and the graduate students tended to be quite focused on their particular subjects of study, while others more readily adapted their learning to the context in which they found themselves. First-time visiting scholars seemed less likely to get deeply involved in ongoing projects and were more dependent on the directors of the center and visiting scholars on their third and fifth visits operated quite independently, leveraging friendships and working relationships that integrated them quite naturally into many different aspects of the school, both professionally and socially.

We identified six subthemes as common among the visiting scholars we interviewed. Each subtheme fits in one or more of Wenger's areas (Table 2).

We discuss the emergent sub themes in the context of each of Wenger's four components, which were predetermined in line with his notion of community of practice. Some subthemes appear in more than one of Wenger's components; we discuss the subtheme only the first time it appears but remind the reader that the subtheme is important in other components of Wenger's community of practice by including it after the relevant section header. Throughout, the voices of the visiting scholars can be heard across Wenger's components, as participants were encouraged to tell their stories in an illuminating and memorable way (Seidman, 1998). All quotations are from the transcripts but are not attributed to specific speakers.

Theme 1: Identity: Learning as Becoming

- Unsure of what to expect
- Personal growth and having a productive stay

Entering a new environment as an outsider for an extended period was a little uncomfortable for some of the visiting scholars. "I felt a little bit intimidated," admitted one visiting scholar, who also recommended that future visiting scholars "don't feel stressed and don't feel intimidated." Another expressed that he "was unsure what would be expected from me." Despite an orientation regarding expectations of the research center well before arrival, visiting scholars generally felt that they were supposed to give back to the school – a theme taken up further below – and often tried to plan more involvement than the director of the research center was looking for. The message to come to the school first and get familiar before contributing – or even the message of not having to contribute at all – was difficult for some visiting scholars to understand and they arrived feeling

Table 2. A Crosswalk of Communities of Practice and Emergent Themes in the Interviews.

Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998)	Emergent Subthemes in the Interviews
Identity: learning as becoming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unsure of what to expect • Personal growth and having a productive stay
Practice: learning as doing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal growth and having a productive stay • Specific takeaways and transfer of learning
Meaning: learning as experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal growth and having a productive stay • Specific takeaways and transfer of learning • Giving back to the school
Community: learning as belonging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling connected to the school • Networking

unsure of their role. One veteran visiting scholar recommended that first time visiting scholars take longer to understand the environment before beginning to collaborate, a luxury for those who have a long enough stay and for those who do not come with a specific project to accomplish with the school, for example a research study.

“Being there pushes me,” reported the consultant, who had been at the school several times, referring to collaborative work she did with faculty members in language classes, the middle school, and with the school’s assessment system. “It is a place to experiment” and it helped me “break down my own barriers,” said another, who had recently received her masters’ degree and was getting some initial experience in the classroom. “I did a lot” and “we were really productive” and the experience was a “massive accomplishment” were further responses, each from different individuals, about their time at the school.

“I was surprised how I could be alone, and I think the amazing view and the nature affected me a lot,” said one professor. The sentiment about the natural setting was common to nearly all participants. From the lodging provided them, visiting scholars have a view across the valley to the next range of mountains, with beautiful sunrises and constantly changing light and clouds. The stunning setting may well play a role in the desire of visiting scholars to return – it may not just be the program and the various opportunities the school affords. However, the same scholar who felt the natural beauty affected her so much also reported that one of the school’s faculty members took her work “to another level,” meaning her curriculum project exceeded her own expectations, quite apart from the setting in which she worked on it.

Younger visiting scholars expressed personal growth in terms of their confidence as academics. “For me as a new academic it was a real boost to be seen differently,” one (now former) graduate student reflected. “It was quite inspiring to know that my research was of interest to other academics and researchers.” Another younger visiting scholar specifically mentioned the word confidence six times during her interview, saying that the experience “helped me develop confidence about my own ideas” and that because the school’s faculty members were curious about her work, it “gave me confidence that I can bring value to international communities.”

Younger visiting scholars also mentioned the intellectual and practical value of their experience. “I had rigorous and stimulating conversations at the same level of the conversations that I was having in grad school,” said one, while another reported that he had learned better how “to communicate with a wider range of audiences,” perhaps because he had more than once found his graduate level vocabulary and understanding needed to be modified for high school economics students. Another visiting scholar reported on her experience being interviewed by students in front of an invited audience: “The speaking experience was great – you can never get enough of that. I’m a bit more reserved and shy, but my ambition to break out of that is what gives me motivation to do these sort of things, so it helped break my own barriers.”

More experienced visiting scholars explored areas they hadn’t known they were going to explore, outside of their usual academic milieus. “I was trying to

understand the culture among the teachers,” said one professor, and another: “I managed to get into an area of research that I hadn’t had the time to dig into before, which is about writing and academic writing, the sociological sides of academic writing.” Still another said that the experience “motivated me” and that she “got into this whole hack learning movement and what that means,” and that the experience has “given me a lot of freedom and encouragement to try new things and to look through a different lens.”

Their experiences were supported by what other visiting scholars noted about the school. There is “a community of teachers who are curious and confident,” said one. “It is such a rich and thriving environment, and I just love being in it,” said another. It is perhaps, in the end, the “role of innovation amid the traditional structure of a big international school” which is the underlying affordance the visiting scholars were noticing. “I haven’t really seen that before.”

Theme 2: Practice: Learning as Doing

- Personal growth and having a productive stay
- Specific takeaways and transfer of learning

The visiting scholars interviewed here experienced the school community and the activity they were involved in through their individual lenses and their motivation to spend time at the school. The youngest, an alumna, wanted to maintain the connection with the school’s faculty members in addition to sharing her experiences in the working world post university. The oldest wanted to catch up on reading and some academic writing in a quiet environment, while being open to learning whatever presented itself during his stay. Some specific takeaways in the range between these two visiting scholar profiles include the following:

- Learning about the application of Agile in education (from the world of software)
- Learning about how the school runs its summer program and the academic year student orientation
- Data collection for a research study
- Creating a video, with students, about sustainability
- Experience in the classroom
- Creating curriculum and teaching about the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
- Creating curriculum and teaching about the ideal school
- Writing about introducing students to Esperanto
- Consulting and presenting in areas of personal expertise, e.g., language teaching, assessment, writing centers, approaches to studying poverty, economics, progressive schools, and diplomacy
- Incidental, unexpected learning, for example, about the nature of international schools

Embedded in the emerging themes of sharing expertise, having time to work, and learning about the school are many additional stories. Visiting scholars often got to know school faculty members and other visiting scholars, sometimes to the extent that new acquaintances become friends and trusted colleagues. All the visiting scholars expressed interest in staying connected to the school, for both personal and professional relations.

Theme 3. Meaning: Learning as Experience

- Personal growth and having a productive stay
- Specific takeaways and transfer of learning
- Giving back to the school

Visiting scholars were interested in sharing their work and expertise at least as much as they were interested in gaining personally from the experience, perhaps even more so. Some visiting scholars discussed initial feelings of not knowing how best they could contribute to the community and others came prepared with ways to be involved that hadn't been requested and weren't necessarily a good fit for the school. "I started thinking about how I can contribute, even though I was told that I do not have to justify my presence. But you feel like you need to contribute to the school." Many visiting scholars expressed an interest in sharing their expertise by speaking with groups of teachers and students. "We presented our findings to the LAS community," and "I wanted to talk about my own experience . . . to dispel some of the myths and pressures that they tell you in high school about how important it is to know what your path is." A third visitor enjoyed speaking to students "from a position of some experience beyond what they've done. . . ." in order to inspire them.

"It was great for me, and I gave something to the school," said a visiting scholar who co-created a simulation with the center director. Finally, "I was happy to present my ideas about the writing center," reported another, because "It's nice to feel helpful to your colleagues."

Theme 4. Community: Learning as Belonging

- Feeling welcome and feeling connected to the school
- Networking

Except for one visiting scholar who arrived at night to a small town that closes many of its restaurants early, making her, in her own words, "alone without anything to eat," nearly all the visiting scholars felt properly welcomed and introduced to the school in their first days and beyond. One mentioned the "interesting rapport" she had with the director before arriving for her first visit and that by her second and third visit she "felt I could just walk in and start straight away." She also mentioned that having a nameplate on the office door when she arrived was "a treat," a small thing that others mentioned as well, in addition to seeing their photos and short bios on screens around campus. "Right

from the beginning, people, the students, they are welcoming you because they have seen you on the digital screens.”

Another mentioned that “teachers were very helpful” and that “people didn’t feel like we were there to create problems for anyone.” Another reported that the director of the Alpine division was “an amazing host” and that “everyone went out of their way” and that “everyone invited me into their classroom.”

Interestingly, the equivalent of work chats by the water cooler is found in the school cafeteria, where visiting scholars are invited to eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Because most of the faculty members take their meals in the cafeteria, often with their spouses and children, the cafeteria is a central location for relaxing and socializing. Nearly every visiting scholar talked about “those chats in the dining hall” and how they are brought “around to the cafeteria so you can converse with the teachers.” The visiting scholar who arrived without any dinner arrangements mentioned how in the cafeteria she “was part of a very big family.” A first-time visiting scholar who didn’t meet as many people as he would have liked to, mentioned that he and his wife “got acquainted with some people in the cafeteria, but we didn’t meet many people apart from that.” In other words, the unstructured, or very lightly structured, environment of the cafeteria makes visiting scholars feel welcome and is probably the most significant mechanism for integration into the community. In fact, no single visiting scholar mentioned the rather expensive dinner at the Swiss Chalet that everyone is invited to once; it is rather the cafeteria, with regular cafeteria fare, that puts out the widest welcome mat.

The net effect is a desire on the part of the visiting scholars to return to the school, as two of them had already done. “I am sure that I will be there again,” said one, and another expressed that “it would be invaluable to come again.” The veteran all agree, as one expressed when she realized her first year jitters were gone and that she knew she was part of the community and could always get right to work if she visited again.

One of the visiting scholars was recruited by a previous visiting scholar, and another visiting scholar was introduced to two previous visiting scholars, whom she subsequently visited at their schools. Another visiting scholar was an alumna of the school, who expressed the desire to stay in contact with the school for that reason, and two others were from the same university, far from the school, who grew to know each through the visiting scholar experience, even though their stays did not overlap.

“It’s about building relationships,” said the one who connected through school visits with previous visiting scholars. “The strength of the visiting scholar program is the diversity and variety of people that come.” The visiting scholar who completed her data collection while on campus had practical reasons to maintain the relationship, namely finishing the paper together and submitting it for publication. One mentioned how she enjoyed “sharing intellectual curiosity with other people” and “maintaining an intellectual connection with the school.” Another expressed it a bit differently: “You find yourself in the center of a melting pot which is intellectually stimulating and interesting.” These are perhaps

the most direct statements of the value found in the interconnected communities of practice that grow out of the visiting scholar experience.

“The opportunity to collaborate with teachers and students with meaningful projects” was valuable to one visiting scholar. Her work with the local community and region made her lifelong friendships with faculty members, noting that the colleague she worked with most is now “practically a family friend” and that her work with local residents required “so much networking” and talking to “so many people.” It is a common theme that not only do visiting scholars develop working relationships with the school’s teachers and others but also friendships that go far beyond simple professional interests. The small business owner commented on meeting other teachers and administrators “with whom I’m still connected.” He recommends future visiting scholars “meet as many people as you can and find a way to collaborate with them, but most importantly, learn their story.” It isn’t unheard of for visiting scholars to host school faculty members when they travel abroad, and more than once school faculty members have been invited to present and write with past visiting scholars on new projects, created long after the visiting scholar has returned home. This study is, in fact, an example of that.

DISCUSSION

Based on the emergent subthemes of the interviews, the visiting scholar program at Leysin American School does seem to fit the description of a community of practice as defined by [Wenger \(1998\)](#). While traveling to the school is simply a given if a visiting scholar is going to stay at the school, it turns out that the experience of being away from one’s everyday setting, including all its comforts, colleagues, and familiar rituals, may play a role in refreshing one’s own identity. The experience, though full of community and natural beauty, is also personally disruptive. Visiting scholars are indeed outsiders who are aware that they are visitors, particularly at the beginning of their stay, and they know that some of their own expert understanding of school and academic settings may not apply in their new context. This disruption is of course social in that visiting scholars must also find a way to fit in, and it is perhaps just enough of a jolt to one’s regular routine to allow new ideas and new ways of thinking about school and schooling to take hold.

That being in a new environment and interacting with new people leads to personal growth seems self-evident, although it isn’t always the case. Perhaps important is that visiting scholars noticed and remarked on the vibrant community (of practice) already in place at the school, with many teachers interested in talking about and reflecting on practice, inviting visiting scholars into their classrooms and other learning spaces, and interacting socially. Learning and growth are made possible, in other words, by the school’s existing communities of practice, composed of interlocking smaller groups, into which the visiting scholar is invited by creating yet another interlocking community of practice. The one or two visiting scholars who expressed a desire to interact more with the school

faculty members and to get involved more in the future perhaps felt that they were missing full access to these networks. Most of the visiting scholars expressed their satisfaction with being interconnected in many ways, often stating that they felt socially integrated, and therefore were able to also be included in work discussions, classes, and other school activity.

During their stay, visiting scholars moved among Wenger's four components of meaning, practice, community, and identity. Arguably, the quality of their learning experience during their time as a visiting scholar was enhanced by the degree to which they experienced each of the four components. Being involved in practice at the school, reflecting on that practice with others, and gaining membership status in a social group interested in that practice seems to have led to deeper learning experiences. Those few visiting scholars who experienced the school mostly as an outsider – save perhaps during meals in the cafeteria – had a less rich learning experience and consequently might be less likely to want to return a second time. The enthusiasm of the veteran visiting scholars, those who came three and five times to the school, speaks volumes. Becoming, and continually becoming, part of a community of practitioners fills both social and intellectual needs, and fuels a desire to repeat or continue the process.

For this set of visitors, it seems clear that the principal physical locus for community building is the school cafeteria. Once again, there is a strong social element at play. People are in the cafeteria to eat, relax, and talk with each other. Interestingly, whom a visiting scholar eats with is mostly random, particularly at first, and therefore the connections are quite natural. Over time visitors and teachers seek each other out, and in most cases visiting scholars receive invitations, or even invite faculty members, to eat together off campus.

Personal growth is evident in comments about learning new ways to operate in a familiar context, e.g., boarding school, or having completely new experiences, like being at a school with dozens of nationalities instead of the homogenous culture of the visiting scholar's home country. Visiting scholars learned to take their cues from their host environment, moving from an assumption that they themselves had to teach or otherwise justify their stay to a mindset with a greater emphasis on learning from the school. For professors who have worked their entire careers preparing teachers for their jobs in K-12 education, a fairly radical mindset shift is required, in that they have come to a high school to learn from high school faculty members, not to tell high school faculty members how to teach. In other words, experienced professors may arrive with an expectation of being an instructor of others, as might a consultant, whereas a graduate student might view the experience much more readily through the lens of someone visiting to learn. No matter where on the spectrum, however, most visiting scholars reflected that they learned a great deal while at the school through what they observed and the conversations they had with faculty members. Perhaps the length of their stay is quite important. Something new that they might miss or interpret mostly through their own pre-existing lens can come up again and again during a stay of many days, with plenty of time for reflection in the cafeteria and elsewhere, effectively granting the time and space to formulate and test new ideas.

Finally, several visiting scholars mentioned specific personal takeaways ranging from learning about existing curriculum, creating new curriculum, exploring different approaches to instruction, working with multiple languages, and understanding the nature of boarding school. Among the group of visiting scholars we interviewed, two individuals regretted not immersing themselves more (i.e., making more social connections and collaborating with more faculty members), though they were pleased with how much of their own “homework” they were able to get done. The experience varied across individuals, shaped by their personalities and working styles, made possible through the social and in situ nature of being part of a working school.

CONCLUSION

A community of practice is something that forms over time, through shared experiences, as people develop mutual respect and trust. In this sense the visiting scholar program creates for the school a community of practice not unlike John Dewey’s laboratory schools, which were created to study, in one of today’s current terms, the *ecosystem* of a school. This laboratory school, however, is unique because of its independence from an affiliation with any particular university and the steady introduction of external guests, the visiting scholars, who become part of that ecosystem (or not) as they wish, with no required agenda. As is apparent in their reflection on the experience, each visiting scholar approaches the experience differently and has different takeaways based on differing personal backgrounds, personal goals, activities available at the school during the period of their stay, and so on. Also apparent are commonalities in their experiences, from feeling welcome and connected, to experiencing personal growth and being able to provide value, in their own ways, to the school community.

There are at least a few interesting next steps as we learn about the effects of the visiting scholar program. One important step is to research the impact the program has on current faculty members who interact, host, and collaborate with visiting scholars. What are faculty members learning and how does the experience affect their practice? Another interesting step is the consideration of applying the program to other schools. To date, our experience has been that educators are quite interested in hearing about the model but reluctant to set up their own program. Despite the perceived value, in other words, the bar to getting started is perceived as too high. We hope through the shared experience of this group of visiting scholars that other schools may take an initial, small step toward supporting visiting scholars. In this school’s case, it was only a matter of saying “yes” to the program’s first visiting scholar, a professor who approached the school himself, and perhaps the spark of imagination his visit lit, encouraging us to pursue the possibility of robust and interlocking communities of practice.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

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