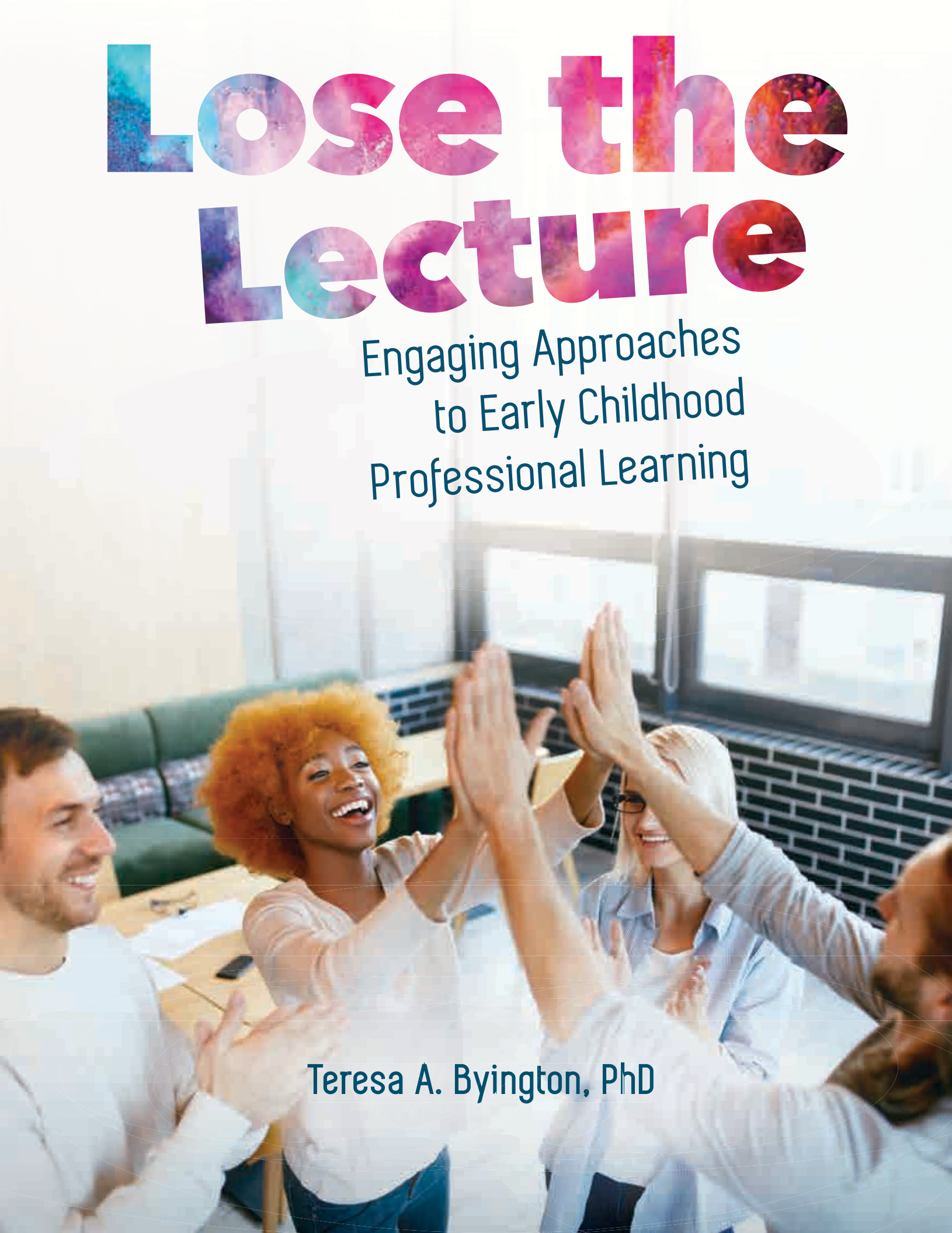# Lose the Lecture

Engaging Approaches to Early Childhood Professional Learning

Teresa A. Byington, PhD

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Gryphon House

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PREFACE

For over ten years, I have been privileged to provide professional-learning opportunities for early childhood professionals. I love seeing adult learners make learning connections and improve their practices. One of those learners, a child-care-center director whom I'll call Tricia, shared an experience that illustrates why this work is so meaningful to me.

One day, Tricia was meeting with one of her teachers to discuss the teacher's Child Development Associate (CDA) portfolio. To see the portfolio better, Tricia moved from behind her desk and sat next to the teacher. As they talked, Tricia remembered a story (adapted from the book *Drive: The Surprising Truth about What Motivates Us* by Daniel Pink) she had heard during a professional learning session:

A new manager, Sofia (not her real name), told her staff that she had an open-door policy. When staff came to meet with Sofia in her office, she sat behind her desk and staff sat in front of it. During these meetings, Sofia's computer, emails, and phone calls frequently distracted her. At her six-month appraisal, much to her surprise, Sofia's staff rated her poorly on her communication skills. After some reflection, she realized that she was often preoccupied and dismissive when her staff tried to communicate with her.

Sofia made one simple change: she added a small table and chairs to her office. Now when staff wanted to meet with her, she left her desk and sat at the table with them, giving them her full attention. At her year-end appraisal, Sofia's staff rated her highly on her communication skills.

Recalling this story caused Tricia to notice a difference between how it felt when she sat behind her desk versus beside the teacher. Tricia recognized that she needed to change and obtained permission to add a small table and chairs to her office for meeting with staff. Six months later, Tricia found that this simple change had made a distinct difference in her relationships with her staff. She felt more connected with them, and they commented that they felt heard and understood.

As a facilitator of professional learning, I find great fulfillment in hearing how Tricia and other participants use concepts from professional-learning experiences to improve their everyday practices. Professional learning affects not only how early childhood professionals interact with each other but also how they teach and interact with children. By providing meaningful professional-learning experiences to early childhood professionals, we improve outcomes for the children and families we serve. Join me on this journey as we explore ways to incorporate rich professional learning into your program and community.

INTRODUCTION

Shifting from Traditional Professional Development to Engaged Professional Learning

Tanisha, a preschool teacher, has just come from a professional-development (PD) session that had no relevance to her. All teachers from her child-care center were required to attend, even though the topic turned out to be health and safety in infant-toddler classrooms. The presenter spent two hours lecturing nonstop, never even opening the floor for questions, as the teachers tried to stay awake. Tanisha leaves with no new information to help her with her most burning concern: her preschoolers' social-emotional development.

Before Tanisha reaches her car, her director, Da-eun, catches up with her. Da-eun comments that the PD session was not helpful for preschool teachers and invites Tanisha to participate in a professional-learning (PL) opportunity. Participants will learn to enhance children's social-emotional development by attending monthly training sessions, meeting with peers in a professional learning community (PLC) twice a month, and receiving weekly coaching. Tanisha likes the idea but hesitates at the time commitment and participation requirements—especially if this program turns out anything like the PD session she just came from. With cautious optimism, though, she accepts the invitation.

During the training sessions, Tanisha learns new skills for promoting social-emotional development. At the PLC meetings, she excitedly shares her successes with other preschool teachers and asks for ideas on meeting current classroom challenges. Each week, Tanisha's coach provides one-on-one support by modeling and helping Tanisha practice new skills. Tanisha begins to see marked improvement in the social-emotional development of the children in her classroom.

BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

A change is occurring in early childhood education. Whereas early childhood professionals once spent a lot of time passively participating in traditional professional-development events, they now increasingly engage in ongoing, continuous professional learning. Communities of practice (CoPs), professional learning communities (PLCs), mentoring, and coaching are supplanting lectures and other less-effective means of continuing education. This book can help you implement professional learning methods into your work. First, let's examine the differences

between professional development (PD) and professional learning (PL)—and why professional learning is more effective.

PD encompasses many types of informal, typically one-time learning experiences. In contrast, PL includes multifaceted, interactive, ongoing learning experiences. Because PL uses multiple formats and makes learning continuous, it makes a distinct difference in early childhood professionals' ability to transfer learning into practice. Specifically, according to Justin Markussen-Brown and his colleagues, by undertaking several types of PL simultaneously, early childhood professionals gain greater understanding of educational best practices and become more effective at implementing these practices. Strengthening practices leads to positive outcomes for children, families, and communities.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is designed to help you think about PL in a new light. You may already engage in some aspect of PL, such as belonging to a PLC, providing coaching, or facilitating engaging training sessions. However, PL works best when a learner engages in several types simultaneously—in fact, this practice results in greater changes than one would expect from the initial investment. It is time to lose the lecture and involve early childhood professionals in engaging approaches to continuing education.

Why are you reading this book? Ask yourself the following questions:

· Do you want to gain awareness about PL?

· Do you want to enhance your cognitive understanding of PL?

· Do you want to explore your feelings about changing PL practices?

· Do you want to apply what you learn by implementing new ideas into your next PL endeavor?

I hope that you answered yes to several of the questions, because this book can help you with all of these goals. The book provides an expanded understanding of PL, encourages you to change your attitudes where needed, and (hopefully) motivates you to act to enhance your skills and practices so that, in turn, you can strengthen the practices of other early childhood professionals.

This book covers three main types of PL:

· Professional learning communities (PLCs) and communities of practice (CoPs)

· Mentoring and coaching

· Effective training sessions

You may ask, "How will this book help me strengthen the PL that I provide?" There are multiple answers to this question:

· You will learn to create effective PLCs and CoPs.

· You will identify why multifaceted PL is worth your time and effort.

· You will learn strategies for implementing effective mentoring and coaching.

- You will explore ways to help teachers become more reflective about their practices.

- You will learn to use the Reflective Strengths-Based Coaching (RSBC) Model.

- You will find step-by-step instructions for over fifty different engagement strategies.

- You will gain a greater understanding of how to meet the needs of diverse learners.

- You will learn how to be a more effective facilitator of PL.

As you read this book, reflect on how you can improve your practices and how you can help your colleagues do the same. Engaging in PL helps you participate in the long-term process of learning and thinking in new ways. Change can be difficult, even painful, but just as a butterfly emerges from its chrysalis, the early childhood profession will emerge as a stronger and more resilient entity as you and your colleagues increasingly engage in PL. Together, we will move the early childhood profession forward to have an even greater positive impact on children, families, and communities.

PART 1

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES (PLCs) AND COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE (CoPs)

CHAPTER 1:

Professional Development versus Professional Learning

Because licensing requirements mandate that Susanne complete twelve hours of training each year, she regularly attends two-hour training sessions. Sometimes she finds them a complete waste of time, while other times she learns possible new strategies. Even then, she rarely ends up trying the new ideas because it is easier to continue teaching as she always has.

In contrast, Karina attends both training and coaching sessions. During each training session, she creates action plans for implementing specific strategies. She also meets with her coach twice a month to discuss her progress on her action plans. The coach challenges Karina to take risks and try different strategies. Change is hard, but as Karina has worked on her goals, her students have become more engaged.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT VERSUS PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Most professions require employees to undertake some type of continuous learning, an enterprise referred to as *professional development* (PD). Ideally, it should address current employment needs and practices. Many early childhood professionals know that PD is important, but if they associate the term with hours of excruciatingly dull lectures that have little or nothing to do with their needs or interests, it has a negative connotation. As a leader in early childhood education, you can change that perception by implementing effective *professional learning* (PL) in your organization. To bring about that change, we need to start by thoroughly examining what PD and PL are and how they differ.

In the field of education, PD focuses on helping learners gain new information and update their content knowledge. It has traditionally focused on one-time "sit-and-get" workshops, seminars, and conferences, though it also can involve more-engaging methods. In the past, PD instructors were seen as all-knowing experts, and learners were expected to passively receive whatever information their instructors presented. More recently, PD providers have begun acknowledging that every learner brings expertise to the learning experience and that adults benefit from discussing ideas. These attitudes and practices form the basis of professional learning (PL), a more-encompassing

term that refers to all educational activities that prepare individuals for their professional work. Table 1.1: Comparing PD and PL outlines in more detail how PL differs from traditional PD.

Table 1.1: Comparing PD and PL

	PD	PL
FREQUENCY	One-time events	Ongoing, continuous
FORMAT	Seminars, training sessions, conferences	Coaching, PLCs, CoPs, interactive training series, virtual platforms
FOCUS	Gaining new information Updating content knowledge	Applying information Changing skills and practices
EXPERTISE	Instructor is the expert and disseminates all knowledge	Instructor and learners share expertise
PRESENTATION STYLE	Inactive Passive learning Unidirectional Direct instruction Lecture One size fits all	Active Interactive learning Multidirectional Facilitated discussions Reflective inquiry Individualized
COMPONENTS	Fixed time and space with limited inquiry and reflection Prescribed	Flexible time and space for inquiry and reflection
LEARNERS	Passive recipients of knowledge Dependent on instructor	Have self-determination and ownership of learning Autonomous
PARTICIPATION	Mandatory Participants have no voice in content	Optional Participants have a voice in content platforms
TECHNOLOGY	Limited Used to share instructor's content with participants	Generally included Used to expand learning and participation Assists in constructing knowledge
DIMENSIONS	Learners involved in only one type of PD at a time (for example, attending training sessions only)	Learners involved in multiple types of PL at a time (for example, simultaneously attending training series, receiving coaching, and participating in communities of practice)

FREQUENCY AND FORMAT

These categories are intertwined, so we will examine them together.

PD frequently takes place as a discrete event that lasts a few hours or days, such as a seminar or conference. Professionals come to the event, receive information from an "expert," and leave. Theoretically, they then go back to their programs and change their practices. However, all too often the motivation to change quickly dissipates, frequently because learners lack time or support for making changes. Other urgent matters usually take precedence. This pattern is unfortunate because a great deal of time, effort, and money go into preparing most PD events.

In contrast, PL involves an ongoing process of inquiry and reflection. It occurs over longer periods of time. Some examples include participating in a coaching partnership over a nine-month period and attending a monthly CoP for several years. Instead of attending separate, unrelated training sessions, learners attend series of training sessions on related topics and receive coaching with the same focus. Additionally, learners interact in person or virtually through professional learning communities (PLCs) or communities of practice (CoPs). Intentionally focused PL leads to greater improvement in teaching practices.

FOCUS

In both PD and PL, participants gain new information and update their content knowledge. PD's focus usually stops here, but PL emphasizes helping participants to learn, evaluate, and change skills and practices. While PD typically only provides information, PL teaches participants how to incorporate that knowledge into what they do every day. For example, a PD session might consist of a lecture on the importance of positive discipline in the classroom. A PL session on the same topic, however, would likely include discussions, case studies, and practice time to help participants learn how to effectively implement positive-guidance strategies in their own classrooms. Participants would also learn about and practice these skills during coaching and PLC or CoP sessions.

EXPERTISE

In traditional PD, the instructor is considered *the* expert. He disseminates all the information that learners "need." In PL, trainers honor learners' expertise and not only invite but expect them to share it. Learners also share expertise with peers in PLCs and CoPs. During coaching sessions, coaches encourage teachers to be reflective and find answers within themselves. Coaches also acknowledge each teacher as the expert on the children in his classroom.

PRESENTATION STYLE AND COMPONENTS

Because these categories are intertwined, we will examine them together.

In traditional PD, the presentation style is frequently passive. The instructor uses a direct-instruction, one-directional approach, such as lecture, based on a one-size-fits-all philosophy. Learners "sit and get." When supervisors mandate such prescribed PD, employees often perceive it as nonessential and irrelevant.

PL requires participants to collaborate and take greater responsibility for their own learning. The presentation style is multidirectional, as the participants and instructors learn from each other. Sessions are interactive, with learners involved in facilitated discussions and other active learning methods. These activities help learners reflectively inquire about what they currently do and what they want to do. This is especially true during one-on-one coaching sessions or small-group peer discussions in PLCs or CoPs. Because of its ongoing nature, PL provides learners with time and space to learn deeply.

LEARNERS

In traditional PD, participants are passive recipients of knowledge, primarily listening to lecture-style presentations. They depend on the instructor for their learning.

PL encourages active learning, and participants have a lot of control over the learning process. In coaching, learners give input on potential goals and then create shared goals with their coaches. Within PLCs and CoPs, participants take ownership of their learning by identifying solutions to their own problems and concerns. As learners interact, they construct their own professional knowledge and then apply it to their individual situations.

PARTICIPATION

In PD, learners generally do not have a say in what the content will be or how they will learn it. Attending the PD session may be mandatory, and the topic may or may not be applicable to a given learner's situation.

In PL, participants have a say in what and how they learn. During coaching, learners help select the specific goals they will work on. Within PLCs and CoPs, learners discuss their concerns and topics of interest.

TECHNOLOGY

Traditional PD involves limited technology use. At most, instructors may present content using programs such as PowerPoint.

In PL, technology serves as a tool to expand interactions, increase participation, and help learners construct knowledge. By using virtual platforms, blogs, online discussion groups, and shared documents, learners interact to evaluate and improve child outcomes. In fact, technology enables peers around the world to participate in the same PL opportunities. Coaches can work remotely with teachers. CoPs can meet virtually and include larger and more-diverse participants. Groups can work on shared projects and never actually meet in person. Technology is an important tool for enhancing the possibilities of PL participation.

DIMENSIONS

Traditional PD generally has a single dimension, meaning that a learner participates in one time-limited PD event. Early childhood professionals are busy, so participating in only one type of PD takes less time and effort.

In contrast, PL has multiple dimensions. A learner typically participates in two or more types of PL at any given time. For example, Laura might attend the monthly meeting of her PLC on

Monday morning, go to an interactive training session on Wednesday night, and have her weekly conversation with her mentor on Friday afternoon. Although PL takes more time and effort than traditional PD, that investment results in more meaningful changes to professional practices.

OTHER BENEFITS OF PL FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONALS

As we've seen, traditional PD has limited impact. I am not advocating that all traditional PD events be eliminated—there is certainly a place for local, state, and national conferences. Instead, I want to see more opportunities for early childhood professionals to experience multifaceted PL throughout the year because PL has a higher probability of leading to lasting change. PL also provides these benefits:

· Inspires creative thought by encouraging learners to think in new ways

· Focuses on positive, strengths-based (what learners are doing well) ideas as it helps learners seek solutions. We will discuss strengths-based approaches in detail in chapter 8.

· Promotes respectful sharing by encouraging all learners to offer ideas

· Provides opportunities for learners to reflect on current and future practices

· Looks at telescopic (big-picture) and microscopic (detail-oriented) views of situations

· Encourages evidence-based teaching

· Becomes a support network for participants to share expertise and learn from each other

This last benefit is particularly important. Given the nature of their responsibilities, early childhood professionals have limited opportunities to discuss professional practices with peers during an average workday. These circumstances often produce a sense of professional isolation. But during PL, learners create networks of connections as they meet and collaborate. For instance, during one CoP that I facilitated, a participant explained that the CoP had helped to validate her challenges and concerns. She was the director of a child-care center, and by participating in the CoP, she had discovered that she and other directors all faced similar issues. This revelation reduced her sense of isolation. Another director stated that before participating in a CoP, she didn't have anyone (aside from her husband) with whom she could share her struggles. The CoP helped her engage in problem-solving discussions about professional practices in a safe environment.

CHAPTER 2:

Overview of PLCs and CoPs

Latesha is a member of a professional learning community (PLC) for preschool teachers at her school. The group meets twice a month to discuss child outcomes and identify ways to improve practices. Recently, the PLC has been examining the results from a literacy assessment. Each teacher was given the results for the children in her classroom and asked to look for areas that needed strengthening. Latesha discovered that the children in her classroom were struggling with receptive language. Using ideas and support from the PLC members, she created an action plan and has been implementing new language strategies in her classroom. She looks forward to attending the next PLC session and sharing the positive changes she has seen in the children.

WHAT ARE PLCs AND CoPs?

Two common forms of PL are professional learning communities (PLCs) and communities of practice (CoPs). Both PLCs and CoPs are groups of professionals who regularly come together to discuss ideas, gain knowledge, and improve their practices. The two groups differ, however, in their other objectives and in their membership, structure and leadership, and focus. Table 2.1: Comparing PLCs and CoPs compares these features, which are taken from the work of Selena Blankenship and Wendy Ruona, Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker, and Etienne Wenger.

Table 2.1: Comparing PLCs and CoPs

	PLCs	CoPs
OBJECTIVES	To help professionals gain knowledge and improve practices To improve child outcomes To influence program cultures	To help professionals gain knowledge and improve practices To network and collaborate on a topic of shared interest
MEMBERSHIP	Usually mandatory for those working in a specific organization Includes staff from the same school or program	Voluntary, based on interest in topic Group size varies May include members from multiple organizations
STRUCTURE AND LEADERSHIP	Formal Facilitators chosen by (or are) administrators and provide extensive structure and guidance Smaller collaborative teams may be assigned within main PLC	Often informal Have facilitators but emphasize collaboration among members, often in small peer learning teams
COMMON AREAS OF FOCUS	Common areas of focus Measurable changes (child outcomes) Shared mission, vision, and values Action Experimentation Continuous improvement Participant accountability	Improving practice Collaboration Sharing knowledge about topic or topics of interest Building relationships Joint problem solving

Enough with the slideshows!

Professional development is important, but early childhood professionals get just as bored, worn out, and disengaged from learning as their younger counterparts do. But while pre-K and K 12 classroom learning continues to evolve and improve, adult learners are often left by the wayside!

Teresa Byington, PhD, brings administrators, coaches, and facilitators a new approach to professional development and adult learning that focuses on the learners—how they think, what they need, and what motivates them to grow and learn. *Lose the Lecture* features dozens of tips and strategies to engage adult learners and help them thrive in their careers.

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Teresa A. Byington, PhD, is a 20 year professional-learning veteran with deep experience as a facilitator, trainer, speaker, and professor She is currently a professor and specialist in early childhood education for the University of Nevada Cooperative Extension. She has been published in numerous peer-reviewed journals, including *Young Children, Young Exceptional Children*, and *The Reading Teacher* Dr. Byington earned her PhD from the University of Nevada–Las Vegas in special education with an emphasis in early childhood education.

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