Professional Communities and the Artisan Model of Teaching

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ABSTRACT  This paper aims to reconcile tensions between an artisan model of teaching and the call for a collaborative teacher community—offering a vision of an artisan community as a context of innovative practice in contemporary American high schools. In his acrid critique of the ‘communitarian movement’, Michael Huberman (1993) argued that strong school community most likely undermines teachers’ independent artisanship by taking up time and limiting professional judgment. Through the experiences and voices of teachers in high schools we studied in the early 1990s, we argue that artisanship in teaching is influenced, for worse or better, by the character of teachers’ professional community. In weak teacher communities, the most innovative teachers were demoralized by a lack of collegial support in addressing needs of non-traditional students; in strong traditional communities, teacher artisanship was squelched or marginalized by the standardized curriculum and assessments that enforced student tracking systems. In contrast, strong collaborative teacher communities engendered artisanship in teaching—by sustaining teachers’ commitment to improving practice, through dialog and collaboration around engaging students in school and content, and by sharing and inventing repertoires of effective classroom practice. We illustrate artisan communities at work with brief descriptions of the subject departments and schools we studied that fit this model of professional community. Building on Huberman’s analogy between teaching artisanship and jazz improvisation, we conclude by highlighting the fundamental role that community plays in developing musicians’ improvisational skills and repertoire of practice.

I have been gradually building a case for the legitimacy of the artisan model of teaching, one that is highly individualistic and context-sensitive and that, as a result, implies the idiosyncratic accumulation of a requisite knowledge base and skill repertoire rather than the application of a more ‘principled’ knowledge base to a formatted sequence of instructional tasks. Put crudely, these are teachers who work alone, learn alone, and derive their most important professional satisfaction alone—or, rather, from interactions with pupils rather than peers. (Huberman, 1993, pp. 22–23)

In ‘The model of the independent artisan in teachers’ professional relations’, Michael Huberman (1993) took a devil’s advocate position on the ‘collegiality
thesis’. He argued against the notion that collaboration with school colleagues benefits teachers’ instructional practice and careers. Huberman’s critique was grounded in his research on individual teachers’ practice, in his assessment of conditions of teaching that constrain teachers’ work together, and in his concerns about evidence for what he called the ‘effective workplace’ or ‘communitarian’ movement and the ‘effective schools movement’. Apparently, he feared that the visions of practice coming from this literature would prompt bureaucratic mandates for school-wide teacher collaboration that would undermine, rather than support, teachers’ artisanship and professional effectiveness. At best, such policies would take up teachers’ time with no benefit for their instruction or career rewards, and at worst, they would diminish teaching to the task of preparing students for standardized tests. For Huberman, teacher professionalism and career rewards were fundamentally grounded in independent artisanship and at odds with the collaborative school cultures that bureaucracies might try to create in the interests of increasing system effectiveness and centralized accountability.

Introduction

Here we aim to reconcile Michael Huberman’s artisan model of teaching with the type of professional community that we have called ‘teacher learning community’ (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). We argue, through the experiences of teachers in American high schools we studied during the early 1990s, that artisanship in teaching is nurtured in strong innovative communities and squelched in both weak communities and strong communities organized around traditional teaching practice. We describe how teacher artisanship is frustrated by the lack of opportunity for colleague feedback and support in weak communities, and in strong traditional communities is constrained by prescribed curriculum and assessments and by tracking systems. In contrast, artisanship thrives in professional communities where teachers work together to improve their success with particular students. To signal the marriage of theoretical paradigms sought by the present paper, we refer to such collaborative, learning communities of teachers as ‘artisanal communities’.

We address several of Huberman’s challenges to the thesis that teacher professionalism hinges on stronger, innovative teacher communities in schools (Nias, 1989; Nias et al., 1989; more recently, McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993, 2001; Talbert & McLaughlin, 1994). Drawing on his extensive research on individual teachers over the course of their careers, Huberman argued that teachers seek conditions of isolation after tenure (1993, p. 31) and that school community and collaboration are unlikely to lead to lasting instructional changes (1993, pp. 32, 35–36). He asserted that teachers’ ultimate career constraints and rewards lie in their successes with individual students (1993, p. 42), rather than in working with peers or in achieving aggregate gains on standardized tests. And he considered the ‘fundamental flaw’ in the effective workplace literature to be ‘its somewhat all-consuming discussion of culture and its curious indifference to the instructional capacities actually needed to follow through in the classroom’ (Huberman, 1993, p. 45).
While making a stunning critique of the premises and evidence for collaborative community in teaching, Huberman also offered thoughts on the potential for authentic, artisanship-compatible collaboration among teachers. These ideas resonate with findings from our research on teacher learning community, and ground a marriage of the artisan model of teaching and collaborative professional community. Huberman (1993) writes:

From the artisan’s logic, I might look instead [of at the school] to the department or to the grade level as the unit of collaborative planning and execution in a secondary school. This is where people have concrete things to tell one another; this is where the contexts of instruction actually overlap. (p. 45)

And speaking of the tool centeredness of teaching, he says:

... the most likely source of new tools is fellow teachers at the same grade level or with the same subject matter as oneself ... if one’s first priority in dealing with one’s classroom is to expand and diversify one’s instructional repertoire—and I am arguing that it is—one’s strongest incentive for collaboration within a building will be the exchange of instructional materials and formats between peers in settings similar to one’s own ... Other forms of collaboration will become secondary and more abstract, as a direct function of how much they take one’s eye off the classroom. (p. 28)

Beyond this issue of authentic teacher collaboration, however, is the question of whether teacher artisanship is supported in schools weak in teacher collaboration. Huberman’s arguments against teacher collaboration take for granted that teachers’ independent artisanship is protected in conventional teacher communities. Our research suggests otherwise. We found that professional realms of classrooms and colleagues are highly intertwined in teachers’ work lives and careers. We have shown, for example, that teachers’ perceptions of the students in a high school differ according to the cultural lens and experience of teachers in different subject department communities. Teachers who work in isolation from their colleagues and lack other instructional supports are more likely to give up on their non-traditional students. Indeed, we saw that a key incentive for teachers to break privacy norms in teaching is to work with colleagues to improve their success with non-traditional students. Teachers who collaborate on instruction are more likely to hold high expectations for students and for their colleagues, to innovate in their classrooms, and to have strong commitments to the teaching profession. Our research supports Huberman’s claim that teachers’ ultimate career rewards lie in their success in engaging students in their classes; at the same time, our data argue that professional communities play a key role in teachers’ success in typical American high schools.

Here, we examine teachers’ professional communities through the lens of artisan teachers’ careers. We focus on experiences of teacher artisans whom we followed for 3 years in the different types of high school professional communities—weak,
strong traditional, and artisan communities. We highlight ways in which the experiences of solo artisans in weak and traditional communities differ from teachers' experiences in artisan communities. We conclude with an analogy between artisan communities in teaching and communities of jazz musicians, picking up Huberman's association of teacher artisanship with jazz improvisation.

Teachers' Careers in Professional Communities

How high school teachers experience their careers in teaching depends to a significant extent on the strength and character of their professional community. In the US high schools we studied in the early 1990s, formal career systems were minimal and inconsequential in teachers' professional lives; the sense of reward and progress offered by an incremental pay increase on the district salary scale was meager compared with the rewards of working successfully with a class of students. Incentives and rewards that matter most for teachers are their success with students, their engagement in course content, and the quality of their colleagues. Possibilities for these professional rewards, and for rewarding teaching careers, are shaped in the day-to-day work lives of high school teachers.

Teachers' opportunities for professional growth and sense of career progress are tied up with the ways in which their school or subject department organizes students' learning opportunities and teachers' work. In most high schools, new teachers are assigned to teach the least desirable courses and very often are left to cope on their own, while experienced teachers get priority in the courses and students they teach. Some departments, we found, enforce traditional standards for instruction by more closely coordinating teachers' work to place students and teachers in levels of the curriculum according to their prior achievements and expertise. In contrast, the high schools and departments we here call 'teacher artisan communities' create conditions for teachers to share courses and work together to invent ways of engaging all students in challenging content. We draw on these experiences to show that artisanship in teaching is frustrated and constrained in weak and traditional communities but, contrary to Michael Huberman's worries, is supported and rewarded in collaborative school and department communities.

Patterns of teacher artisans' work lives and careers in these types of professional communities are summarized in Table I as advance framing for our analysis.

Challenges to Artisanship in Weak and Traditional Communities

Conditions of teachers' professional lives in the typical weak and traditional communities of American high schools undermine artisanship and frustrate the 'solo' artisans who struggle to make their careers in such communities. In general, teachers' opportunities to succeed with their students and to grow professionally are highly unequal in these professional communities, according to the subjects, courses, and students they are assigned to teach. School districts in most states are bound by union contract to assign teachers to schools and teaching positions on the basis of seniority, sometimes creating misfit between beginning teachers'
TABLE I. Teacher artisans’ worklives and careers in types of professional communities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension of teaching work and career</th>
<th>Solo artisan in weak and traditional communities</th>
<th>Artisan community</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Colleague relations</td>
<td>Aloof from instruction; coordination around curriculum</td>
<td>Collaboration around instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basis for course assignment</td>
<td>Seniority; tracking by credentials</td>
<td>Rotation and mentoring relations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Instructional practice</td>
<td>Private craft; idiosyncratic knowledge</td>
<td>Common craft; shared knowledge, inquiry, innovation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professional rewards</td>
<td>Intrinsic rewards; prerogatives of seniority and professional status</td>
<td>Intrinsic rewards; collective progress; professional growth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional identity and commitment</td>
<td>Independent artisan; commitment contingent on individual resources and success</td>
<td>Artisan community participant; commitment to craft and community</td>
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content background and preparation and their courses. Within high schools, subject departments usually have established course-tracking structures and usually they track teachers into courses on the basis of their credentials and expertise. These broad patterns are enforced through seniority contracts and norms, through market dynamics that attract best-prepared teachers to the most desirable teaching positions, and through local school politics that enforce tracking systems. Weak and traditional communities more or less strongly enforce these patterns, and teacher artisanship within them suffers from the limits they set on teachers’ professional growth.

Seniority prerogatives mean that the most experienced teachers get ‘first dibs’ on job openings for which they are broadly credentialed. Beginning teachers are usually assigned to the least desirable schools in a district, and low-seniority teachers often are assigned to courses outside their main field of preparation [1]. A young physics teacher hired to teach science in California’s Onyx Ridge High School when we began our research confided to us that her only hope of teaching physics there in the next 10 years was if the department’s senior physics teacher died, since she was sure that he would never leave the school.

Teacher tracking practices in these professional communities reflect a broader pattern in American education that matches best-qualified teachers with the most academically successful students [2]. High school tracking systems are institutionalized in secondary education—with ‘honors’, ‘advanced’, and Advanced Placement courses that carry certification through external testing and college recognition on the top end, and ‘remedial’, ‘basic’, or ‘general’ classes on the bottom. In the general status order of high school teaching, the ‘top’ courses
carry more prestige, and the low-level courses are most challenging. Teacher assignment practices, especially in the most traditional department and school communities, are based on teachers’ credentials—teachers’ level of subject expertise is matched to students’ competence in the subject. Best-prepared teachers are assigned to the most academically advanced students; least prepared teachers are assigned to the lowest-achieving students. Assignment to low-track academic classes is doubly costly for teachers in terms of professional rewards, both signaling their low professional standing and bringing challenges of working with the least-engaged students. Teachers are tracked, just as students are tracked, in these communities.

Inequalities in teachers’ professional statuses and rewards in these communities also come from status hierarchies of subjects taught in comprehensive US high schools. Judith Little (1993) documents inequalities in professional status and influence between academic and non-academic subjects. Leslie Siskin (1994) shows that mathematics and science come out ‘on top’ of the discipline hierarchy, a pattern that she attributes to their higher value in American society and in education reform, the scarcity of specialists in these subjects who go into teaching, the authority and agency of their formalized disciplines, and (for science) the material investments they command (pp. 124–132). Inequalities in teachers’ work lives undermine their sense of common ground and shared enterprise, and inhibit collaboration between school colleagues across and within disciplines. They tighten the boundaries around teachers’ classroom practice and set unequal opportunities for their success.

Teachers’ experiences of career in both weak and traditional high school settings, we found, also focus on their students’ academic and social statuses as markers of their professional status. In both Michigan and California urban high schools, teachers often described changes in their students’ characteristics in language that conveyed a sense of decline in their teaching career. Michigan teachers told us that they had lost ‘good kids’, ‘good students’, when the economy suffered and middle-class families left the inner-city neighborhoods. Teachers in a California district talked nostalgically about the days before court-ordered desegregation brought an abrupt decline in social and academic statuses of their students. In the past, these teachers had taken professional pride in serving the offspring of middle-class families, bound for college and professional careers; with changes in their student populations, many experienced a loss of such intrinsic rewards. Some also experienced public criticism of education as professionally demeaning. One Michigan teacher commented: ‘I don’t tell people I’m a teacher anymore’.

While the cultures of teacher communities do not determine individuals’ beliefs or actions in the classroom, and thus do not directly impact artisanship in teaching, they do set terms of teachers’ practice and opportunities for their success. Artisanship is difficult to pursue in a ‘sink or swim’ professional environment or when frustration over class assignment erodes professional identity and reward. Both weak and traditional professional communities also limit teachers’ learning opportunities in the workplace and their capacity to sustain innovative
classroom practice. However, they do so in rather different ways and with different consequences for artisanship.

**Teaching in Weak Communities: isolation and demoralized colleagues**

Sometimes I think I need to get out of the classroom to go into some other area of education, otherwise I'm not sure how much longer I'll last. I'm having to do it [revise my American History course] pulling on my own resources and doing it myself. And that’s frustrating ... (Oak Valley social studies teacher, 10 years teaching)

My first year here, I think the people were doing it as a favor, they just weren’t wanting to bug me because they knew that I was a new teacher, and that I had a lot of adjustments and they wanted to give me my space. But I was desperate for feedback. [Someone to say] ‘well what were you trying to achieve and have you thought about trying this and how about this, and have your tried...’ I crave that and I wish I had a lot more of that. (Scholastic biology teacher, 6 years teaching)

These teachers work in departments where teachings’ traditional privacy norm governs their relations with colleagues and limits their opportunities for collaboration on course design and learning through feedback and knowledge sharing. Relationships among teachers in most departments in the comprehensive high schools we studied are like those in the Oak Valley Social Studies Department and the Scholastic Science Department. Whatever pride in professional autonomy teachers may take from this condition, most feel isolated in their work and fall into routines of practice and lowered expectations for students that undermine artisanship (see McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001, Chapter 3, for elaboration). Innovative, craft-oriented teachers in such communities are the exception.

Professional isolation is self-perpetuating. When teachers feel that colleagues are not sharing resources and experience that could help their own practice, they guard closely their own resources and successes. The Oak Valley social studies teacher who revised the American history course by ‘pulling on my own resources and doing it myself’, for example, does not feel generous toward the colleagues who failed to help. He complained, ‘You get tired of sharing and getting nothing back...Suddenly you begin to retrench and say “Wait a minute”, you know’. Over time, this teacher’s energy and commitment to private artisanship waned, and he was looking toward a career outside the classroom.

Isolation is a persisting problem for teachers in typical urban, public high schools who struggle alone to meet the needs of increasingly diverse students, many of whom are not prepared for their grade-level curriculum. And the costs of isolation are most deeply felt by the most committed and innovative teachers in weak community contexts. Many of these solo artisans ‘burn out’, as did the Scholastic science teacher quoted earlier, who left teaching after her sixth year. Ironically, privacy appears in these settings to be most desirable to those teachers who, according to colleagues, have ‘retired on the job’.
Although the Scholastic science teacher gave credit to her colleagues for thinking they were 'giving her space', she was deeply disappointed in the lack of collegial support in her school. Early in her career at Scholastic, she gave up her prep periods to sit in on a colleague's biology class, and felt that this was a major help when she began teaching biology 4 years later. However, absent collaboration and mentoring from him or other colleagues; the model of instruction he provided set unreachable expectations for her practice as a beginning teacher: 'He's been teaching for 28 years and has very high standards. I wanted to be as comprehensive a teacher as he is. And in my self analysis I'm trying not to burn out—I realize that I need to adjust [expectations] a little bit so I'm not so driven'. She struggled alone to work out strategies for addressing the needs of chronically absent students through make-up work and parent conferences until her third year, when she 'rebelled completely', refusing to deal on her own with students who were failing her classes through absence. This teacher constantly worked to resolve tensions between her professional standards and commitments to students and the realities of her work life teaching non-traditional students with little collegial support. Refusing to lower her high expectations for teaching and learning, an adaptation made by many teachers in weak professional communities, she ultimately left the profession.

Professional rewards are sparse in such weak high school communities. Intrinsic rewards of teaching are highly uncertain in most classes and often insufficient to maintain teachers' engagement in the craftwork of teaching and their professional commitments. Rewards from professional statuses available to some teachers cannot compensate for the lack of intrinsic rewards in teaching. For instance, although the Scholastic science teacher was singled out by her administrators for early-career recognition and a special leadership program in the district, this honor and opportunity did not offset the frustrations and weak intrinsic rewards she experienced in teaching alone. Veteran teachers are privileged in such communities, positioned by virtue of seniority rules for course assignment to reap the intrinsic rewards that come from teaching academically successful students in their department's college-prep classes.

Teaching in Traditional Communities: stratifying norms and equity issues

Some high school departments, we found, address challenges of teaching non-traditional students by organizing their work to uphold traditional standards of practice and to more formally sort students and teachers into curricular tracks. They exaggerate the stratifying practices in secondary education and break seniority rules to ensure that the most highly qualified teachers are assigned to the most academically challenging courses and most successful students. These 'traditional communities' challenge artisanship in teaching by specifying more tightly the content and sequence of courses and the assessments that teachers will use to evaluate student performance and admission into courses. They formalize a theory of instruction rooted in assumptions that learning is sequential, skills are ordered, and readiness to learn particular subject matter is unequal [3].
Teachers’ relations with one another are neither entirely private nor collaborative in these communities. Rather, collegial relations focus on coordinating students’ passages through course ladders—a coordination that entails testing, reviewing results for student placement, and adapting the course schedule to match student performance distributions. Teachers play specialized and unequal roles in the organization according to their kind and level of expertise. This division of labor limits potential for teachers to find common ground for discourse about instruction, since they rarely share a course with another teacher in the department. The professional hierarchy sometimes plays out in unequal power and influence among teachers in such departments, when the more ‘advanced’ teachers meet informally to make department decisions.

Teacher artisanship in such traditional professional communities tends to be on the margins of both subject instruction orthodoxies and professional status hierarchies. An innovative, dynamic English teacher in the traditional Onyx Ridge High School community whom we followed over several years repeatedly told us about the challenges she faced in working alone to ensure her students’ success and the professional costs she sustained in this school.

My ideas don’t have a place in this school. They do, I think, for some of my kids, not all, but for many of my kids. This campus chooses to see itself as an elite academic institution, as the smaller version of UC Adobe Viejo, as the crème of the crop school in Adobe Viejo. It does not perceive itself as a school that is here to meet student needs. Particularly those that might be different from the upper class community in which it is located ... So my talents, or my desires, or my skills don’t have any place here. Is there something [here] that encourages me to do what I do for my kids? No. It’s from watching Jaime Escalante in Stand and Deliver. It’s from my 11th grade English teacher, it’s from my college experience when my professors pushed and pushed and pushed me. But it sure as heck isn’t from anything I’ve gotten in [teaching in this professional community]. (Onyx Ridge English teacher, 11 years in teaching)

In the face of strong counter norms in her school and department professional communities, this teacher’s artisanship placed her at odds with most of her school colleagues. She told us that her department colleagues ‘accuse me of making them look bad’. Two colleagues said, for example, that ‘they felt forced to compete because of her habit of writing lengthy comments on students’ written work’. Her strong commitment to equity regularly got her into trouble with colleagues who saw their teaching challenges in terms of students’ weak skills. When the department moved to screen students for placement in advanced English by giving a written examination, she was the lone voice in opposing a policy that would limit expectations and opportunities for student learning. She explained that her opposition was a matter of conscience and belief that teaching should bring students into higher-level content, rather than keep them out of it.

She found her department colleagues to be so negative about the needs of low-achieving students in the school, mainly students of color bussed across town
to this middle-class neighborhood, that she regularly mentioned to us the political and emotional struggles of teaching in the school. While always on the brink of ending her teaching career, this teacher developed sustaining bonds with teachers outside her field ‘who expect a lot of their students’ and made her feel that she was not entirely alone in her professional commitments. Most sustaining for this solo artisan in a professional environment she found hostile, was her success with her students. She spoke with pride about her reputation with students of being a teacher who ‘pushes you’ and quoted a kid who came back from college to visit her and told her class ‘You’re going to work your tail off but boy are you going to be glad you’re in this class’.

The persistence of the Onyx Ridge English teacher’s artisanship in a strong traditional community attests both to the power of the artisan model of teaching and to the power of professional community to organize against it. The technocratic, routinizing culture of such traditional communities illustrates the sort of effect on practice that Michael Huberman feared would result from policies promoting teacher community. This teacher’s experience shows how artisanship in traditional strong professional communities necessarily becomes a stance of political opposition [4].

In contrast, the ‘artisan communities’ we studied attest to the power of professional community to form strong cultures of teaching artisanship.

Teaching in Artisan Communities

Teachers here in the English department especially are very generous in the sharing of information and actually reach out to colleagues. In other schools, some teachers are very protective of their territory, or there’s a competitive nature in teaching. It’s not true here. (Oak Valley English teacher, recent transfer to the school)

In the department it’s standard, everyday practice that teachers are handing other teachers’ sample lessons that they’ve done or an assignment that they tried, or a new teacher joins the staff and instantly they’re paired up with a couple of buddies who are teaching the same schedule. [This is] quite different from the other three schools where I’ve taught, where it seems that teachers did their own thing and you didn’t really share. (Veteran teacher, Oak Valley English Department)

Teachers’ professional lives in innovative school or department communities depart radically from those we saw in weak and traditional communities. These Oak Valley English teachers offer a glimpse of teachers’ experiences of their jobs and careers in teaching cultures that are collaborative and inclusive. Teachers take a collective stance on the issue of teaching expertise, seeing one another as resources for their improved practice with students in all of their classes. The notion of ‘learning community’ that we often use in referring to such communities highlights teachers’ collaboration to develop new knowledge of practice and support each other’s professional growth. This meaning captures the spirit and
dynamic of Huberman’s notion of artisanship in teaching, as a context-sensitive accumulation of a requisite knowledge base and skill repertoire. However, in these communities, the craft of teaching is shared rather individualistic and idiosyncratic. Instead of quelling individual invention and craft in the classroom, teacher collaboration in these artisan communities promotes and nurtures creativity as the source of their ongoing collective learning and capacity to respond effectively to the needs of contemporary students. Teachers in artisan communities give up whatever meaning privacy holds for their sense of professionalism; in return, they experience rewards of success with contemporary students that too often escape teachers in weak or traditional high school communities.

Committed to equity for their students, artisan communities actively challenge traditional norms for assigning teachers and students to courses that match best-prepared teachers to highest-achieving students. These communities acknowledge openly that classes with students who are least academically engaged are the most challenging for high school teachers. Oak Valley’s English Department Chair praised their practice of rotating courses within the faculty: ‘I think our best teacher should be teaching those [skill level] classes, and it works out that way. It’s very positive for the kids and for the teachers’. He went on to say that teachers value this course assignment policy because ‘there isn’t anybody who is sort of tracked into a dumping ground. Every year and a half, I’ll be teaching “Exploring Literature”, the same thing for everyone. That way, no one gets burned out’. Such assignment practices engender inquiry into practice among teachers who ‘just kind of teamed up’ to work on their teaching. The professional community becomes a locus of learning for teachers as they share experiences with the range of department courses and students.

We were struck by how consistently teachers working in artisan communities of practice said that they found their jobs satisfying, even in the context of classroom challenges associated with a diverse student body. Oak Valley English teachers of all pedagogical persuasions expressed pride in their department and pleasure in their workplace: ‘Not a day goes by that someone doesn’t say how wonderful it is to work here’, said one. In contrast to teachers’ sense of professional decline in Oak Valley’s weak Social Studies Department, teachers in the English Department experienced their careers as progressing—through expanding instructional repertoires and success with students.

The special character of teachers’ professional lives and careers in artisan communities is further revealed by experiences of teachers in Esperanza High School’s Mathematics Department and in three school-wide learning communities.

An Artisan Mathematics Department

The Esperanza Mathematics Department is a professional community committed to advancing students and teachers alike through the mathematics curriculum. With only half of the faculty degreed in mathematics at the time of our study, the fact that the department did not track its teachers was particularly noteworthy. Instead, the department organizes its work to ensure that teachers widely varied
in their discipline and teaching backgrounds would be prepared to teach advanced mathematics courses. This professional community upholds high standards for all department colleagues, as well as for all students in the school. Artisanship is nurtured in the Mathematics Department as teachers encourage one another to take risks, to try out new ideas and curricula. A veteran teacher commented: ‘I think I’m changing. It’s real time consuming ... not something that you’d learn overnight ... you fall on your nose a couple of times. And you’ll have to pick yourself up and try something different. I don’t think you can help but change with the population changing’. Another teacher said ‘the faculty is very supportive of one another; we all work together and we all have common goals’.

Not only are teachers supported to master new pedagogical practices, they are expected to take on new courses and develop their content expertise so that the whole faculty can teach the highest level of secondary mathematics instruction. One teacher explained the department’s policy of rotating teaching assignments:

Special emphasis is given to rotating staff assignments amongst the various courses to foster staff development—so no one gets stuck. For example this has meant that over the years all staff have developed the ability to offer the calculus course. Consequently we are in a much better position than Longview High School where, when the calculus teacher retired recently, there was no one in the department to take over ... whereas we now have four calculus teachers.

Esperanza mathematics teachers talk about ‘growing’ into courses. Regarding calculus, a teacher commented: ‘I grew into it last [year] ... another teacher grew into it the year before’. Another teacher told us: ‘what we try to do is improve everyone, so that eventually everyone will be able to teach it [calculus]’. Record data for the 3-year period of our study confirm teachers’ reports about rotating course assignments in the department. In Esperanza, four mathematics teachers (two with graduate degrees and two with B.Sc. degrees, in mathematics) rotated teaching calculus. In contrast, in another district school (Rancho) that we studied, only one similarly qualified teacher taught calculus and another taught mathematics analysis (pre-calculus); teachers in this department were stuck in their specialized positions within the tracked curriculum. The shared ownership and rotation of the department’s courses fosters an artisan spirit and growing shared repertoire of practice in this teacher community.

In contrast to teachers’ stagnating or declining careers in the weak and traditional Mathematics Department we studied, Esperanza mathematics teachers expressed the rewards that came from growing in their subject and engaging students in their classes, as well as from their department’s relatively strong success with non-traditional students. A veteran mathematics teacher in Esperanza, who is regularly sought after for service on district and state committees, said ‘what’s really important [in terms of professional rewards] is what goes on in the classroom with kids’. Rather than focusing on their formal expertise and status relative to colleagues, teachers in this department keep their eyes on student
learning and use collaboration as a strategy for supporting the faculty reinvention and learning necessary to achieve success with their diverse students.

The Esperanza mathematics faculty seeks opportunities for professional development outside the school and brings back ideas and information to share with other department members—leveraging individual knowledge resources to support the group’s learning. Clearly the professional collaboration within this department community and between it and broader networks of mathematics teachers promotes, rather than undermines, artisanship in their work together and in their classroom practice. The norms and practices of this artisan community continually challenge instructional orthodoxies and tracking systems that inhibit innovative practice and professional growth in typical mathematics department communities.

School-wide Artisan Communities

An artisan community across a school faculty is rare in American secondary education, given the prevalence of large comprehensive high schools and teachers’ strong discipline identities. However, included among the 16 high schools we studied were three such school communities, with the pseudonyms Prospect, Greenfield, and Ibsen schools. A look inside these school communities provides further insight into workplace conditions that support high school teachers’ collective artisanship and professional growth school wide. uniting teachers’ work in each of these schools is the mission to engage and support the personal growth of non-traditional students. Boundaries between teachers’ work within and outside classrooms are blurred, so that the artisanship of teaching in these school communities goes beyond classrooms into hallways and lunchrooms and after-school activities where teachers work with students.

That these schools are so atypical raises questions about their value for informing understandings of teaching in general, and of artisan communities in particular. Huberman complained that ‘too much of this research [on collaborative teacher community] is ... being conducted with outlier sampling—that is, with contrasting cases at extremes of a distribution—although the majority of cases are lumped in the middle’ (1993, p. 36). So it is worth saying at this point what we think about the value of such cases for furthering understanding of artisanship and professional communities in teaching. First, because many forces in the context of teaching undermine artisanship, especially in classrooms occupied by poor students of color, it is important to find and describe the places where it thrives. Second, sampling the diversity of these [outlier] cases helps us to identify conditions that unite them. Instead of serving as models of ‘requisite features’ of an artisan community, the cases help to describe principles of artisanship in communities and the diverse ways in which they can support teacher artisanship. Third, they let us see the scope of artisanship in teaching. While subject departments serve as more useful models of artisan communities in secondary education, revealing how teachers can work within a discipline to develop a common craft and shared repertoires of practice, school-wide artisan communities point to
potentials for artisanship in teaching that go beyond classrooms and subject disciplines.

In the high schools Greenfield and Prospect, teachers’ work is framed significantly by their students’ rebellious stance on school. Teachers’ shared enterprise, and opportunity for community artisanship, centers on engaging these students in ‘doing’ school. Together, teachers and other school staff design policies and structures to promote individual students’ engagement in the school and their academic success in classes. While the small size of these schools and strong administrative leadership makes school community possible, fundamental to these artisan communities is teachers’ clarity about their common professional challenges and the strong norm that they will collectively address the challenges. These teachers refer to their school as a family or team. What is most striking and different from professional cultures in typical schools is that, by using their colleagues as a sounding board for professional and personal struggles, they expand their and others’ repertoire of practice and maintain commitment and rewards from teaching in the most difficult teaching conditions.

Without exception, teachers at both high schools talk about teaching in terms of their school community. At Greenfield, teachers said: ‘We learn over and over that the group is smarter than the individual’. One teacher captured the spirit of Greenfield’s community with a metaphor of keeping a boat going down the river when there are 20 oars and no-one’s ever been down the river before—the sense of charting a new course through mutual support and commitment. A Prospect teacher commented ‘fellow workers are very important to make it through the day’. Another offered: ‘I don’t think any one of us would be able to survive in this job without the rest of the staff’. Norms salient in these settings center on valuing the students, who were rejected by colleagues elsewhere, and trusting the community as a vehicle for teaching success and professional growth. These principles challenge conventional norms of privacy and preferred assignments to high-achieving students. Furthermore, teachers’ commitment to the school community displaces the subject identities that organize work and relationships in typical high schools. Greenfield and Prospect teachers accept as ‘normal’ class assignments that are outside their specialty and come to define their role as crafting content for their non-traditional students. Their artisanship takes them well beyond the typical challenges of high school teaching. Greenfield and Prospect teachers find considerable professional reward in their schools’ success in engaging students who otherwise would fall through cracks in the education system and society. These jobs exact enormous energy from teachers, and the school community helps in many ways to renew individuals’ sense of mission and capacity. In these high school settings, teachers report that sharing their struggles sustains their personal commitment and effort. They also see that collaborating with colleagues on classroom practice translates into academic success for their students.

The Ibsen Performing Arts School highlights tensions between discipline-based community and school-based community in a school that pursues academic and
non-academic goals for student growth. As in Greenfield and Prospect, the
school’s mission and design challenge norms of high school teaching such as
subject-centered practice, student tracking, and impersonal teacher–student rela-
tions. Ibsen poses particular challenges for traditional mathematics instruction,
since the orthodoxies of sequential teaching and learning are challenged by
conditions of performance rehearsals that pull students out of classes. Mathematics
teachers in particular are pressed to reconstruct their instructional practice in
fundamental ways. Furthermore, the dominance of performing arts in the school
culture challenges the traditional status order in high schools, affording math-
ematics and science teachers less prestige and deference from school colleagues
than they would receive in a typical high school.

Ibsen’s principal and administrators are central in forging teacher collaboration
and facilitating the work of the many interlocking artisan communities in the
school. They keep the focus on supporting students’ success in academics and arts
and on helping teachers manage tensions between ‘real academic subject teaching’
in secondary education and the school’s performing arts program and student
development mission. As one administrator described the school’s approach to
addressing the tensions:

The way you do it is to find out how to make it work in both places. In
other words, if you’re a math teacher and you are having problems with
Mary Jones who’s the lead in the play, you can’t come to me and say,
‘Well, we’ve got to kick her out of the play because she’s failing my
class.’ We’ve found that doesn’t work. What we do is find a way for her
to be a learning situation for both of us. And we’ve finally, I think,
figured out how to do that with the math and science departments, who
were undone trying to survive that.

The challenge for teacher artisanship in Ibsen and occasions for community
development lie in the particular situations of teaching that the school program
generates. For example, to address the problem of pull-outs for performing arts
rehearsals, teachers invented a tutoring center that would be staffed by some of
the ‘ringer’ mathematics and science students, and the school added resources for
a credentialed teacher to tutor students after school two days per week.

Collegial relations in Ibsen cut across discipline boundaries. ‘There’s more
teaming here. It’s the program’, a teacher reported. Even academic teachers get
involved in Ibsen’s major theater productions, working on stage props or cos-
tumes, for example, and teachers across the school have a spirit of ‘working
together’—a school-wide artisanship that brings them into loose collaborations
with colleagues around student-centered school enterprises. The energy of Ibsen’s
community comes from the staff’s shared belief that ‘if we work together we can
solve whatever problems we have’.

The power of the Ibsen school community to foster teachers’ artisanship and
challenge traditions is illustrated by the experience of a veteran mathematics
teacher who moved to the district from the Midwest. In the first year of our study
she had just been assigned to teach in Ibsen, and she was angry and frustrated over conditions of teaching in the school. She told us:

They [district] just put me here. Frankly, it’s hard to get teachers to come here ... It’s very kid-oriented and arts-oriented. It’s hard on the arts teachers too. There’s a lot more frustration built into this school than typical.

During this interview, she also complained that the principal does not back up teachers’ authority with students, saying: ‘I want to close my door and have the administration deal with problems!’.

Three years later, this teacher told us that her feelings about the school had changed entirely since we had first talked with her—and she wanted to put the record straight. In this interview, she said: ‘I now appreciate what we do for students here that doesn’t happen in a regular school. I now see what the trade-offs are between having a regular math department and this; the personal values and support are worth it’. By this time she was an active member in the school community and a close colleague of the English teacher in the classroom next door. She acknowledged professional costs of departing from the sequence and hierarchy of a ‘real’ high school mathematics department, but she also derived professional awards from working with students who take an active role in their learning and with colleagues who support one another’s professional growth.

Teachers’ professional lives in Greenfield, Prospect, and Ibsen are notable for their collaboration around school missions and the needs of their non-traditional students. They illustrate how high school teachers’ craft can extend beyond classrooms and disciplines into broader goals and settings for youth development. And they highlight the professional rewards that teachers find in and from their collaboration with colleagues to support students’ growth—especially when artisanship, as Michael Huberman conceives of it, is essential to students’ success.

**Artisan Community: looking beyond teaching**

Artisanship among teachers thrived in the collaborative teacher communities we studied, and was squelched in typical high schools and subject departments. Our research convinces us that innovative communities of practice—or teacher learning communities—are essential to sustaining artisanship in teaching in US public schools. The departments and schools that we call artisan communities in this paper improved teaching practice by sharing knowledge, critiquing each other’s work, inventing and evaluating new practices, and together crafting a shared repertoire of practice.

Michael Huberman was skeptical about the notion of artisan community for several reasons, we think. First, his intense focus on the practice of teaching among committed teachers drew attention to individual inventiveness and processes of artisanship in the classroom and away from the ways in which school colleagues mattered, for better or worse, for teachers’ development. Second,
teachers in the school settings where Huberman conducted his research are not likely to have encountered the challenges to teaching that most American teachers have experienced in recent decades. As we have argued, shocks to routines of classroom practice from demographic shifts in student populations prompted the alternative patterns of teacher adaptations that became embodied in teacher community cultures (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). Third, he worried that the ‘teacher workplace movement’ would prompt bureaucratic mandates for teacher collaboration that would have negative consequences for teaching practice or, at least, would result in ‘contrived collegiality’ (Hargreaves, 1991) that wasted teachers’ time. Since Huberman delicately suggested that there might be something ‘resolutely feminine in the notion that the missions of institutions are dependent foremost on the quality of the relationships ... among their members’ (1993, p. 32), we extend the issue of gender in this dialog to wonder if there might be something resolutely masculine in the impetus to defend teachers’ professional autonomy from bureaucratic encroachment.

In concluding our case for a marriage of the artisan model of teaching and a learning community vision of the teaching profession, we look to the world of jazz musicianship for corroborating evidence that community matters for developing individuals’ artisanship. Huberman used the metaphor of jazz improvisation for teaching, referencing Yinger’s (1986) work and arguing that ‘Much as in the jazz band or in comedia dell’arte, the succession of instructional acts is dictated by the drift of events after the initial situation’ (Huberman, 1993, p. 21). Clearly, he was deeply inside the practice of teaching when he concluded that it was inherently individualistic and antithetical to professional community, because the development of jazz improvisational skills depends fundamentally on individuals’ participation in jazz musician communities. By stepping outside the practice of artisans and the individualism of their improvisations, we can focus on the role that community plays in building their repertoire of practice.

As in the artisan communities of teachers we studied, communities of jazz musicians work together to develop their improvisational skills, to create new compositions and arrangements, and to build and sustain commitment to jazz among musicians and the public. A jazz ethnomusicologist describes musician communities in much the way that we observed the artisan teacher communities we studied:

... Experts guide younger members in applying their technical knowledge by constantly rehearsing and performing with them, thereby transmitting their deep sense of responsibility for the music ... With time and experience, newcomers gradually accept greater responsibilities within bands, not only serving as soloists, but contributing original ideas for repertory and musical arrangements. (Berliner, 1994, p. 50)

Without belaboring the analogy with further quotes from research on the development of jazz improvisation, we emphasize that professional jazz musicians are committed to building communities through which young musicians learn to perform and through which their collective practice develops. They take pride in
mentoring upcoming musicians and in expanding their repertoires of practice (Berliner, 1994, p. 64). They do this by organizing formal and informal occasions for younger musicians to expand their musical repertoires, to develop technical skills within instrument groups, and to improvise in dialogue with diverse musicians.

Even a superficial reading of the ethnomusicology of jazz reveals how individuals' success in learning to improvise depends on their participation in such communities of practice. Jazz musicians grow professionally through apprenticeship relationships and collaboration with fellow musicians. By participating in jazz communities, musicians learn essential skills, repertoires, styles and dynamics of improvisation. Research on the work lives of jazz musicians makes clear, further, that community is the context in which they create innovations of practice.

The notion of artisan community captures the meanings of teaching that Michael Huberman cared about most, and also the conditions under which it thrives. Like musicians in the world of jazz, teachers build their improvisational skills through focused mentoring, peer critiques, and work with colleagues to invent new forms of practice. By implication, sustaining the artisan model of teaching depends on building and supporting collaborative teacher communities and networks engaged in innovative teaching practice.

Notes

[1] In regions where student enrollments are declining, as they were during the late 1900s in the Michigan districts we studied, seniority-based assignments mean that new high school teachers often teach out of the subject and grade level for which they were prepared, and are uncertain from year to year whether they will have a teaching job.

[2] National survey data show this broad phenomenon across US schools. Schools with highest proportions of poor students and students of color have the least well-prepared teachers (Ferguson, 1991; Darling-Hammond, 1997).

[3] We provide lengthy description of the Rancho High School Mathematics Department, which epitomized this type of professional community, in McLaughlin & Talbert (2001).

[4] Only in college preparatory independent schools did we see instances where private practice appeared to promote teacher artisanship and professional community. In these settings, strong collegial community is built around the school's mission, teachers are highly engaged in their discipline, and students are selected for their academic success. Teachers in such schools prize the opportunity to create courses around their special expertise and interests, and to emulate the work lives of college professors. A teacher in the academically elite private school expressed her sense of privilege in such privacy of practice this way: 'no one interferes with you, and the administration always backs teachers'. The strong academic mission of these schools provides a source of school-wide identity; teachers feel that they share the goal of their students' successful admission into elite colleges and universities.

References


