COLLABORATION IN BLENDED SPACES: EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF EDUCATORS IN A MIDWESTERN HIGH SCHOOL

A Doctoral Thesis

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Abstract

A key aspect of the work of public secondary teachers is collaboration with colleagues to address the problems of their practice toward outcomes of professional growth and student success. This narrative inquiry aimed to describe and understand the lived experiences of educators as they expanded the boundaries of their collaborative practice. Through in-depth interviews, participants shared their lived experience of transitioning their mode of departmental collaboration from face-to-face to a blended model of practice. The underpinning conceptual framework of Wenger’s Community of Practice and situated cognition, helped to frame this study. The conceptual framework of communities of practice was constructed from the idea that adult learning is a result of social practice rather than the structured, hierarchal environments typically designed for learning.

Themes around trust, technology proficiency, accountability and leadership emerged from the narrative accounts of four Midwestern secondary educators. The study results have implications for collaborative practices for teachers, supports for technology proficiency, resolving the conflict between accountability and agency, and conditions necessary for a successful transition to blended collaboration as a condition of systemic learning in a public high school.

Key words: Blended collaboration, collaborative practice, communities of practice, agency, accountability
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Chapter 1: Introduction

As long as public schools have existed in the United States, teachers have worked tirelessly to meet the various learning needs of their students. Historically, teachers worked in isolation, but in the past two decades schools have evolved into organizations where teachers work collaboratively to improve their professional practice and improve student outcomes (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995). Research has shown that teachers who collaborate have increased motivation, direction and hold themselves to high levels of accountability for personal, professional growth (Smylie, Allensworth, Greenberg, Harris & Luppescu, 2001). Despite the efforts of building administrators to build protected, common collaboration time into teachers’ contracted time, there are still a limited number of minutes in each day which don’t always prove adequate for meeting the various learning needs of students. The addition of online collaboration to an existing face-to-face collaborative practice has the potential to expand the opportunities for teachers to professionally collaborate outside the confines of time and space (Duncan-Howell, 2009).

The purpose of this narrative inquiry is to explore the lived experiences of four secondary educators as they transitioned their mode of collaboration from face-to-face to a blended model in a Midwest, urban high school. This research will uncover their stories of success and failure, while their lived experiences reveal insights to assist other schools as they make their transition to collaboration in a blended environment. Exploring the lived experiences of these four collaborating educators has the potential to guide the path for all teachers collaborating in a collective effort to meet the various learning needs of their students.
Context and Background

Teacher collaboration has evolved into an increasingly common professional practice throughout our nation’s schools and is an essential facet of learning for both teachers and students (Ronfeldt, Farmer, McQueen & Grissom, 2015; Seo & Han, 2013; Ketterlin-Geller, Baumer & Lichon, 2015). Defining the practice of collaboration is quite difficult. While the practice of collaboration has been a topic of frequent study, it is most frequently referred to through the different formats and structures in which collaboration is applied and occurs (Friend & Cook, 1990). Professional collaboration occurs through many formats and structures including Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), Critical Friends Groups (CFG) and Whole Faculty Study Groups (WFSG). However, regardless of the form and structure, educators and researchers Marilyn Friend and Lynn Cook (1990) have defined collaborative practice as “a style for interaction between at least two co-equal parties voluntarily engaged in shared decision-making as they work toward a common goal” (p. 72). Unfortunately, it is most common for teachers to work together when mandated by building administration, thereby stifling the voices and limiting collaborative practices of teachers (Seo & Han, 2015).

As the practice of teacher collaboration continues to evolve, so does the use of technology in education. Virtually anything that can be accomplished in a face-to-face environment can now be accomplished online, and educators are starting to recognize that technology has the potential to be an influential tool in teacher collaboration. Currently, there are numerous online environments that provide unique combinations of functionality and features, making them ideal for use as collaborative tools. Online collaborative environments can host communities of shared knowledge providing users opportunities to edit, organize and contribute content (Goodwin-Jones, 2003; Marks, 2010). Supplemen
collaborative practices with collaboration in an online environment has the potential to increase professional learning and student achievement, thereby improving the outcomes of professional collaboration in schools.

There are three basic types of online environments can be used to expand traditional face-to-face collaborative practice into a blended format. Synchronous online environments are live and communication occurs in real-time, while communication occurs offline in asynchronous online environments (Yamagata-Lynch, 2014). The third online environment suitable for online or blended collaboration is an online tool suite. Online tools suites consist of both synchronous and asynchronous tools such as word processing, spreadsheets, calendar tools, and electronic presentations (Laufenberg & Wagner, 2012). As all three types of online collaborative environments continue to increase in innovation, educators are continuing to experiment with those environments to best meet their needs and the needs of their students. The education profession is in the beginning stages of understanding how online collaborative environments can support face-to-face collaborative practice. Therefore, this study sought to explore the lived experiences of teachers transitioning their face-to-face collaboration to a blended model of practice.

**Research Problem**

Daily, teachers are challenged to educate students in a technological learning space they may not have previously experienced, creating a compelling call for reform of current perceptions of professional collaborative environments (Friesen & Clifford, 2003). This claim resembles the beliefs of of Jennifer V. Lock (2006), who states, “for educators to move forward, they must think differently about professional development, using a community model approach
where technology provides new spaces to facilitate learning and collaborative inquiry, designed to enhance teaching and learning,” (p. 675).

Online technology platforms provide the means to access a multitude of online platforms that can be used to expand the boundaries of professional collaboration. That being said, current collaborative practices typically occur only when teachers are scheduled to physically meet in a face-to-face manner, collaborating around a table or even in student desks in an effort to improve student performance. This method of face-to-face collaboration rarely provides teachers the opportunity to organically “engage in meaningful, ongoing conversations about instruction” (Ferriter, 2009, p. 34). The use of online environments as a complement to face-to-face collaboration removes the barriers of scheduled time and space and allows collaboration to expand into anytime and anywhere professional learning environments by evolving into a blended practice (Duncan-Howell, 2009). Blended collaboration practices have the potential to provide schools the foundation for a more personalized and relevant forum resulting in meaningful learning, professional reflection, and ongoing change.

After examining the literature related to blended collaborative practice and specifically how educators collaborate with the purpose of improving student outcomes, it is glaringly obvious that large gaps exist. The first topic noticeably absent in the literature is that of blended collaboration. There is little research that exists examining collaborative communities that co-exist in both face-to-face and online environments. Rather, the literature is abundant in the examination of collaborative practices that exist solely as either face-to-face or online. Another gap noted in the existing literature concerns the participants, interactions, and purpose of online collaboration. Much of the existing literature examines the participants as teacher and students interacting in a virtual classroom where the teacher is responsible for successfully creating and
maintaining an online learning environment. This purpose and the nature of the interactions are quite different from teacher colleagues collaborating for the purpose of professional growth and improving student achievement.

Given the identified gaps in existing literature, this study was designed to explore the lived experiences of educators as they transitioned the mode of their collaboration. Narrative interview data was collected in an effort to dive deep into the stories of teachers working in an urban high school in the Midwest, as their collaboration practice transitioned to a blended model.

**Purpose Statement**

While much research has been conducted on face-to-face and online collaborative practices, there is a gap of research that exists in professional collaboration occurring in blended environments. The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to explore the lived experiences of four secondary educators as they transitioned their mode of professional collaboration from face-to-face to a blended model, at an urban high school in the Midwest.

**Research Question**

This study sought to explore the lived experiences of educators as they transitioned their mode of collaboration from face-to-face to a blended model. The research question for this study was designed to facilitate an understanding of how the outcomes and organizational structure of teacher collaboration can evolve as a result of introducing an online environment to the site’s current face-to-face collaborative practices. The primary question of this research was: *How do four secondary educators at a Midwest, urban high school describe and process their experiences transitioning their face-to-face collaboration practices to a blended model that includes the use of online collaborative tools?*
Rationale and Significance of Research

A fundamental expectation of public schools in the United States is that teachers will collaborate professionally in a collective effort to improve student outcomes. In many collaborative relationships, collective knowledge resulting from shared values and peer expertise only result when face-to-face, collaborative time is scheduled and applied in the most effective manner possible. However, blended models of collaboration are not limited by the constructs of time and space, harnessing the potential to amplify the efforts of educators working together. Online collaborative communities have a dynamic nature providing a natural ebb and flow of interactions, thus, eliminating the need for collaboration that occurs only when face-to-face time is scheduled (Duncan-Howell, 2009).

The problem of research addressed in this study has significance in both local and broad perspectives. In a broad perspective, literature supporting collaboration as a vehicle for professional development is abundant. Research has shown that structured collaboration models, like communities of practice and professional learning communities, are more productive than traditional staff development models (Schmoker, 2006). However, research focused on blending face-to-face collaboration practices with online collaborative environments is relatively uncharted (Hew & Hara, 2006). This research has potential to expand on the success of traditional face-to-face collaboration models by reducing the confines of time and space (Wenger, White & Smith, 2009).

Professional collaboration has become a standard expectation for teachers. As a result of this expectation, teachers are held accountable for participating in scheduled, face-to-face addressing tasks such as, job-embedded professional development, student success teams, data teaming, curriculum writing and revision, and professional learning communities. However, in
January 2014, the Missouri State Board of Education approved a major assessment change that required local school districts to reevaluate the effectiveness of their traditional collaborative practice when addressing student assessment.

In January 2014, the State Board of Education approved the administration of a national standardized assessment to all 11th grade students attending Missouri public and charter schools, with the first state-wide administration taking place in April 2015. In the summer of 2015, the schools received their profile reports and the data showed the research site’s 11th grade class performed significantly below the state and district averages in all areas. Deeper analysis of the data revealed specific weaknesses in areas related to the study participants’ content area.

As a result of the 2015 11th grade profile report, the teachers at the research site developed a detailed approach to improve student knowledge and performance across grades 9 – 12. In order to maximize consistency and communication across their department, the teachers began utilizing Google Apps for Education as a collaborative tool in an effort to improve student outcomes. Through the exploration of the lived experiences and stories of these educators, this narrative study has the potential to support building administrators as their schools transition to blended modes of collaboration.

**The Community of Practice Conceptual Framework**

Researcher Etienne Wenger has defined communities of practice as “a group of people who interact and who develop relationships that enable them to address problems and share knowledge” (Wenger, 2004, p.3). Wenger's (2004) work in the area of communities of practice is foundational in viewing workplace learning, adult learning, and technology through a common lens, and conceptual construct of communities of practice is built on the belief that for adult learning to occur, social practice must take place. This idea stands in stark contrast to the closed
environments typically designed for learning. Additionally, the learning that occurs within and between members of a community of practice can be viewed from a situated cognition perspective which “removes learning from that which only occurs within the person’s mind and highlights the importance of context and social interaction as determinants of the learning that takes place” (Merriam & Bierema, 2014, p. 118). Viewing communities of practice through the perspective of situated cognition illustrates how the learning that occurs through authentic collaboration is a product of situational context and social interactions (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Communities of practice are comprised of adult learners, providing a forum where learning is contextualized and situated cognition naturally transpires (Merriam, 2004).

It is important to note that all collaborating communities cannot be termed communities of practice. Communities of practice may organically develop from the need to address a specific problem, or they may develop as an unintended consequence resulting from the social interactions of community members (Wenger, 2006). For this to remain true, a community must exhibit three central characteristics:

1. The Domain: A community of practice has an identity established by a “shared domain of interest” and members of a community of practice share a commitment to that common interest.

2. The Community: Activities and joint discussions provide opportunities for members of a community of practice to engage in the shared “domain of interest.” Through these opportunities for social interaction, information is shared that has the power to facilitate collective learning and build strong member relationships.

3. The Practice: Members of a communities of practice, participate in a shared practice through sustained interaction and engagement.
(Gillespie, 2000; Wenger, 2006)

As illustrated in Figure 1, all three characteristics must be evident for a community to constitute a community of practice; and it is important to note that all three characteristics must work together as one, rather than occur in isolation (Byington, 2011). As illustrated in the domain community practice model, the common interest addressed by community members defines the domain. The community then develops a practice to address the common interest identified by members. Through the study of the common interest, the community is moved to action resulting in a sophisticated understanding of the domain. In turn, a recursive flow occurs connecting the domain, to the community and the practice.

Absent from many traditional approaches to group learning is that members “transmit tacit knowledge, that which may otherwise never be found in manuals, guidelines, or similar documentation amassed by organizations” (Bozarth, 2008, p. 9). This is a distinction of
communities of practice and the transference of tacit information only occurs as a result of the common commitment exhibited by its members which cannot transpire due to organizational mandates of membership and participation (Lave, 1991; Wenger, 1998). The learning that occurs within the community is what drives a community of practice, rather than a focus on the “unit they report to, the project they are working on, or the people they know” (Wenger et al., 2005, p.4). Members of a community of practice are also members of additional organizational teams and committees; however, what is unique to a community of practice is the focus on collective learning rather than product outcome. Situated cognition results in the collective knowledge generated within these communities and is the vehicle that drives teams and committees to function at a high level.

In 2000, Etienne Wenger was commissioned by the U.S. Federal Government’s Council of CIOs, to research then current technologies with the potential to support Communities of Practice. The intent of Wenger’s research was to identify specific online tools possessing the potential to support communities of practice, however the study became a stimulus for considering thinking of how online tools and communities can shape one another.

The identification of two tensions vital to the understanding of how technology and communities intersect, were revealed in Wenger’s (2001) report. The first tension revealed points to the idea that most often, community members identify with their community regardless of when or where they meet. The identification members develop with their community occurs as a product of the collective learning and practice they experience together. Tension is created, for instance, when all members of a community are unable to meet face-to-face. In these instances, online tools can alleviate the issues of both time and space. The relationship between individuals and the community is the basis for the second tension identified by Wenger (2001).
Memberships in multiple organizational communities are frequently maintained by members, which often results in a struggle by members to maintain their own identity. The addition of technology to this tension can potentially cause confusion where participants view an online environment as a community when in reality the online environment is a tool the community uses for collaborative purposes.

Wenger built the foundation of his research on traditional face-to-face communities of practice, many researchers have since applied Wenger’s work to online communities of practice where collaboration and learning occur solely online. The integration of technology and specifically online environments with communities of practice can result in unique and beneficial outcomes. According to researchers McLure-Wasko and Faraj (2000), technology provides an limitless opportunity for information exchange and provides the potential for knowledge to be continuously “regenerated and contextualized” while preserving relevance for community members (p. 160). Furthermore, their work provides evidence that participation in a community of practice occurring online results from pro-social behavior and a sense of moral duty. Members who benefit from membership in an online community of practice are frequently inspired to give back to and strengthen their community in return for their professional growth. This further illustrates situated cognition by providing an example of adult learning that occurs when “learning is what is constructed by the interacting of people in a particular situation with particular tools” (Merriam, 2004).

The research of Friesen and Clifford (2003) shows that collaboration within an online community of practice can transform teaching practice. Professional growth by teachers is a product of organically developing modes of collective learning and their subsequent links to
professional learning and increases in student achievement. Friesen and Clifford (2003) describe this organic development of professional growth in the following manner:

It grows in unpredictable ways because teacher-learners move through an e-learning space according to their own needs intentionally connected to others. For each learner, the space becomes what it is because each learner uses it in ways that make most sense to them. (Friesen & Clifford, 2003, p. 3)

Online communities of practice that result in this type of collaborative experience produce “a more authentic learning experience...than does an experience designed for and delivered to a ‘generic’ audience drawn from a wide range of school settings and contexts” (Cole, 2004, p. 7). Opposed to traditional modes of professional development opportunities where experts provide information to participants without affording educators opportunities to develop new learning and knowledge.

The sense of belonging and membership developed by members, is an important characteristic of online collaborative communities, and a lack of restriction in time or place facilitates this sense of belonging (Kreijins, Kirschner, & Jochems, 2003; Yin, 2010; Lock, 2006). Further study of the social interaction and professional development resulting from online collaboration has revealed that member relationships develop meaningful interactions focused on a common purpose (Lock, 2006). As professional development practices continue to expand to include online tools, educators will begin to build capacity in the practice of collaborating online, while expanding their growth to include a multitude of different communities (Lock, 2006).

The community of practice framework is a sound choice for viewing any method of teacher collaboration. Wenger (2000) describes large systems of learning as “constellations of
interrelated communities of practice” (p. 229). This description provides an appropriate metaphor for the current organization of public school systems where “small-interrelated communities of teachers learn together within a larger school community” (Wenger, 2000, p. 229). In turn, larger communities of interrelated schools come together to form school districts, and when necessary educators in different district may work together to develop additional collaborative communities. This continuing pattern of growth may occur while the need exists, and is applicable whether collaboration exists face-to-face, in an online environment or blended somewhere in between.

**Conclusion**

A fundamental expectation of public school teachers in the United States is that they will collaborate professionally in a collective effort to improve student outcomes. Although many schools are able to schedule common collaboration time for teachers, an increasing number of schools are exploring options for expanding their collaborative practice to a blended format. This study explored the lived experiences of four secondary educators as they transitioned their existing face-to-face collaboration to a blended mode of collaborative practice. To explore the lived experiences of the four participants, a narrative inquiry approach was utilized. Chapter two provides a literature review investigating the practice of collaboration among educators and its expansion to online forums. The research methodology and data analysis are addressed in Chapter three. Chapter four presents the narratives, and Chapter five offers the results of the research and considerations resulting from the study.
Definition of Key Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following terms are defined.

**Asynchronous Online Environment**: Any online collaborative environment where communication occurs is offline and does not occur in real-time (Yamagata-Lynch, 2014).

**Blended Collaboration**: Any professional collaboration where members interact through a combination of online and face-to-face environments.

**Blended Community of Practice**: Any community of practice where members interact using a combination of online and face-to-face collaborative practices (Yamagata-Lynch, 2014).

**Collaborative Online Environment**: Any online platform where synchronous and/or asynchronous communication may occur. Examples include but are not limited to: blogs, wikis, online course management systems, social networking platforms and online tool suites (McLeod & Lehman, 2012).

**Collaborative Practice**: “A style for interaction between at least two co-equal parties voluntarily engaged in shared decision-making as they work toward a common goal” (Friend & Cook, 1990, p. 72).

**Community of Practice**: “A group of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting in an ongoing basis” (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002, p. 4).

**Face-to-Face Collaboration**: Collaboration where communication and collaboration occur only when members meet in the same physical location.

**Online Tool Suite**: Any online collaborative environment that consists of both synchronous and asynchronous tools such as word processing, spreadsheets, calendar tools, and electronic presentations (Laufenberg & Wagner, 2012, p. 137)
**Professional Collaborative Community:** A community of teachers learning together to enhance their own practice and improve student learning (Lieberman & Miller, 1999).

**Professional Learning Communities:** An ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. Professional learning communities operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous job-embedded learning for educators (“All Things PLC”, n.d.).

**Situated Cognition:** A theory of adult learning “constructed by the interaction of people in a particular situation with particular tools or artifacts (including language, signs, and symbols)” (Merriam, 2004).

**Synchronous Online Environment:** Any online collaborative environment where communication is live and occurs in real-time (Yamagata-Lynch, 2014).

**Whole Faculty Study Groups:** A collaborative, job-embedded approach to professional development where every faculty member is a member of a study group focused on student learning needs (“Murphy’s Whole-Faculty Study Groups”, n.d.).
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to explore the lived experiences of four secondary educators as they transitioned their mode of professional collaboration from face-to-face to a blended model, at an urban high school in the Midwest. One primary question guided this study: *How do four secondary educators at a Midwest, urban high school describe and process their experiences transitioning their face-to-face collaboration practices to a blended model that includes the use of online collaborative tools?* This research question was designed to facilitate an understanding of how the outcomes and organizational structure of teacher collaboration can evolve as a result of introducing an online environment to the site’s current face-to-face collaborative practices.

A great opportunity exists to contribute to the current empirical research surrounding professional collaboration practices. This literature review explored and evaluated seminal bodies of literature in the areas of teacher professional development, communities of practice, collegial interaction and collaboration, online collaboration and learning, teacher resistance to technology and Google Apps for Education. Each of the reviewed topics of literature provided background and context to this study, with collaboration as the intertwining theme throughout all the bodies of literature in this review. Additionally, this literature review evaluated the literature using the following guiding questions:

1) How does collaboration help teachers address issues in education?

2) How do communities of practice foster collaboration leading to the professional growth of teachers and success of students?

3) What does online collaboration look like, and what issues present themselves in the research on online collaboration among teachers?
4) How does Google Apps for Education work to support online collaboration?

Significant to the literature review is the identification of key search terms used to acquire specific research articles which led to generation of general topics within the literature. The initial search terms “blended collaboration” and “blended communities of practice” were utilized to identify literature primary to this study. Additional layers of search terms included combinations of the “online collaboration,” “online communities of practice,” and “Google Apps for Education.” The final search terms used for this literature review included “teacher resistance to technology,” and “administrator and teacher perceptions of accountability.” It is important to note that these search terms were used in various combinations in an effort to capture a wide breadth of the literature relating to the problem of practice. Multiple research databases were used, such as EBSCOhost, Gale Cengage, Elsevier, JSTOR and ProQuest, and yielded a host of peer-reviewed articles pertinent to the problem of practice. The articles were then reviewed for pertinence and were organized into the aforementioned five categories which will be explored in detail within the following sections.

**Collaboration Among Educators**

Foundational literature in the area of collaboration among educators has focused on the specific collaboration models of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), Communities of Practice (CoP), and Whole Faculty Study Groups (WFSG). While research confirms that utilization of a specific collaboration model is more effective than traditional professional development, it is the models’ focus on collegial collaboration that generates professional growth (Schmoker, 2006). In *Results Now: How we can Achieve Unprecedented Improvements in Teaching and Learning*, Schmoker (2006) explains “continuous, structured teacher collaboration improves the quality of teaching and pays big, often immediate, dividends in student learning
and professional morale” (p. 177). In 2004, The National Staff Development Council included
the following in their staff development standards “Staff development that improves the learning
of all students organizes adults into learning communities whose goals are aligned with those of
the school and district” (p. 13).

In 1995, Linda Darling-Hammond and Milbrey McLaughlin wrote a seminal article for
*Phi Delta Kappan*, detailing an innovative mode for teacher professional development, which
viewed educators as both teachers and learners. The authors wrote that in order for the needs of
all students to be met, teachers must “rethink their own practice and teach in ways they have
never contemplated before” (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995, p. 598). In 1995, this was
a modern perspective on professional development, particularly because it required teachers to
reflect on their own instructional practice through consistent and frequent collaboration with
peers. Traditional professional development often consists of pre-packaged learning
opportunities for teachers, developed outside of the school environment by “experts” with little
or no connection to the participants. Superficial learning with little application to the everyday
work occurring in schools is often the result of this top-down mode of professional development
(Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2009). However, collaboration
by teachers possesses the potential to produce a stronger investment in a teacher’s own learning
process as well as the learning processes of their peers. Other benefits of collaboration include
“greater individual and collective knowledge growth, better confidence and motivation levels,
and improved social interactions” (Trilling & Fadel, 2009, p. 109). Considering the potential of
teacher collaboration to inform instruction, it is unfortunate that “accumulated experience and
expertise within a school” is often overlooked resulting in missed opportunities for professional
From extensive research on professional teacher growth and learning, Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995) suggest that professional development that results in professional growth maintains the following six characteristics:

- Engages teachers in the experiences of teaching, assessment, observation, and reflections on the processes of learning and development;
- Participant-driven and grounded in inquiry, reflection, and experimentation;
- Collaborative, knowledge-sharing and focused on teachers’ communities of practice rather than individual teachers;
- Connected to and derived from teachers’ work with students;
- Sustained, ongoing, intensive and supported by modeling, coaching and problem-solving; and
- Connected to other aspects of school change


In a companion article to “Policies that Support Professional Development in an era of Reform” written by Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995), Ann Lieberman (1995) wrote “Practices that Support Teacher Development, Transforming Conceptions of Professional Learning”. Lieberman’s article supports the existing literature surrounding collaboration as professional development by gleaning the early work of the National Society for the Study of Education (1957, as cited in Lieberman, 1995) which advised that teachers should collaborate and share their professional growth with peers (Lieberman, 1995). In the article, Lieberman (1995) also notes how schools can transform into learning organizations stating:

The ways teachers learn may be more like the ways students learn than we have
previously recognized. Learning theorists and organizational theorists are teaching us that people learn best through active involvement and through thinking about and becoming articulate about what they have learned. (Lieberman, 1995, p. 592)

While Lieberman’s work does not focus on the practice of collaboration, its support of existing literature surrounding collaboration as a format for professional development leading to both professional and organizational growth is significant.

Two recent studies have examined the link between teacher collaboration and student achievement. In 2015, the research team of Ronfeldt, Farmer, McQueen and Grissom released their findings resulting from a two-year study on over 9,000 teachers employed by Miami-Dade public schools (p. 475). Their research was particularly innovative because it was the first to measure teachers’ experiences of quality collaboration rather than the collaboration structures and models that create the conditions for quality collaboration to occur (Ronfeldt et al., 2015, p. 481). Results from this study show that when teachers indicate experiences of participating in quality collaboration focused on instruction, their students have higher math and reading achievement gains (Ronfeldt et al., 2015, p. 500). This supports the foundational work of researchers who found that better instruction resulting from professional collaboration has the potential to improve student achievement (Cole, 2004; Trilling & Fadel, 2009; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Lieberman, 1995).

Even stronger than the findings linking teacher experiences with quality collaboration and student achievement, the Miami-Dade study also found that teachers working in schools with a culture of quality collaboration result in even higher increases in student achievement (Ronfeldt et al., 2015, p.503). The researchers believe that “schools with a culture of collaboration about particular students have better mechanisms for triaging student issues and
distributing teacher responsibility across the community in ways that help students to achieve” (Ronfeldt et al., 2015, p.503). This finding is also evident in the research of Szczesiul and Huizenga (2014) who studied teacher collaboration at two secondary schools in the United States. The researchers found that teachers desire a common purpose and the articulation of common goals to guide collaboration, and without them the purpose of collegial collaboration is missing for many teachers (Szczesiul & Huizenga, 2014, p.182). Both studies shed light on teacher collaboration and the conditions that are necessary to increase student achievement.

Communities of Practice Fostering Collaboration in Schools

The very core of what teachers need to know and need to be able to do derives from collegiality and practice. This aligns with the view from Wenger’s (2004) community of practice framework that clearly indicates that a teacher’s work and professional growth are completely entwined (Schlager & Fusco, 2003). While the foundations of Etienne Wenger’s work in communities of practice did not originate in the school setting, the body of literature surrounding communities of practice in the school workplace continues to expand. In 2004, Wenger authored an article on knowledge management stating “communities of practice are groups of people who share a passion for something that they know how to do, and who interact regularly in order to do it better” (p. 2). While the previous quote was not written with the contexts of education and schools in mind, it helps clarify the importance of organizing and providing structures for teachers to work in a community of practice as a coherent strategy for maximizing on-going professional growth in schools (Brouwer, Breckelmans, Niewenhuis & Simons, 2012).

In 2001, The Consortium of Chicago School Research published a report resulting from a three-year study addressing teacher professional development in Chicago, the results of which
have far reaching implications for the community of practice model of professional growth in the school workplace (Smylie, Allensworth, Greenberg, Harris & Luppescu, 2001). The Chicago study overwhelmingly illustrates how communities of practice in the school workplace benefit professional culture and growth in teachers:

   In schools with strong professional communities, teachers find motivation, direction and accountability for continuous learning and development. They find among their colleagues sources of new ideas, intellectual stimulation, and feedback essential to instructional change. They also find encouragement and safety in challenging taken-for-granted assumptions, risk-taking, and experimenting with new ideas.

   (Smylie et al., 2001, p. 50)

This finding indicates that the collegial interaction and collaboration resulting from working in a community of practice can directly affect the professional growth and development of teachers.

In the text, No Turning Back: The Ironclad Case for Professional Learning Communities, Schmoker (2005) states, “Teachers do not learn best from outside experts or by attending conferences or implementing ‘programs’ installed by outsiders. Teachers learn best from other teachers, in settings where they literally teach each other the art of teaching” (p. 141). In other words, the collaboration and collective learning that occurs within a community of practice is an effective method of teacher professional development (Enthoven & De Bruijn, 2010). A 2015 guest editorial in Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice, discusses teacher agency and “the idea of a teacher as an active agent at the school level” (p.615). The authors, Toom, Phyältö and Rust (2015) define teacher agency as “teachers’ active efforts to make choices and intentional action in a way that makes significant difference” (p.615) and state that professional collaboration, ongoing professional development and student learning occur at higher levels
when teachers harness their own “active professional agency” (p.615). The concept of teacher agency ties neatly to Wenger’s theory of Communities of Practice, as well as existing research on Professional Learning Communities.

In 2013, *Educational Leadership* published an article titled, “How do Principals Really Improve Schools?” authored by Rick DuFour and Mike Mattos. The authors argue that the key strategy for increasing student achievement, and therefore school improvement, is to increase the rate and quality of teaching in classrooms through the creation of a “collaborative culture and collective responsibility” (DuFour & Mattos, 2013, p. 37). According to DuFour and Mattos (2013), the development of the conditions conducive to a collaborative culture and collective responsibility should be facilitated by building leaders. By guiding a community of teachers through the use of evidence of student learning as a manner of improving teaching, student outcomes then improve (DuFour & Mattos, 2013). A 2012 study by Brouwer, Breckelmans, Niewenhuis and Simons also emphasized the importance of school leaders fostering community and a collaborative culture in their schools. Their findings clearly state, “school managers (i.e. school leaders and team leaders) could play a more proactive role in supporting the teacher teams’ community-building efforts” (Brouwer et al., 2012, p.416).

The reviewed literature regarding communities of practice fostering collaboration in schools shows that not only do communities of practice initiate professional growth and increases in student achievement, but also places the responsibility of building a community of learners on the shoulders of all educators.

**Online Communities of Practice and Collaboration**

Through the introduction and use of online collaborative environments school organizations have the ability to change the cultural and geographic boundaries of professional
development by shifting traditional communities of practice into those of a blended format. Online collaborative practices have the potential to complement the positive outcomes of an existing community of practice and face-to-face collaboration. The potential exists because rather than collaborating only face-to-face time is scheduled by building leadership; collaboration occurring with the support of online tools provides an unrestricted mode for collaboration. For instance, expanding opportunities for collaboration to include online tools oftentimes leads to increased contributions by less vocal teachers because it alleviates possible feelings of low self-efficacy and the potential fear of stronger personalities (Ferriter & Graham, 2010). With a unique ability to provide a vehicle for connecting people separated by the boundaries of time and space, online tools offers strong potential as a collaboration solution (Derven, 2009).

Online communities of practice also provide a means for meeting continually evolving organizational needs, such as engaging millennials (Derven, 2009). During the 2011-2012 school year, approximately 16 percent or 3.8 million teachers in the United States were under thirty years of age and considered next generation learners and millenials (U.S Department of Education, 2013, p. 6). According to the American Society of Training and Development (2009), “Millennials, the generation born after 1981 are expected to comprise over 46 percent of the workforce in 2020.” The millennial generation has high levels of self-efficacy related to technology and prefers online communication to communicating face-to-face. In order for schools to successfully recruit and retain millennials, relevant opportunities for professional development should be made available, including opportunities for online professional collaboration.
The findings of Bette Gray (2004) highlight specific benefits of online communities of practice for participants. One benefit documented by Gray (2004) is that online collaborative environments provide a forum for participants to develop professional social communities through collective story-telling and shared problem-solving. Through the process of collaborative story-telling and problem-solving an “online community provides members a medium for negotiating meaning, of making sense and understanding their work” (Gray, 2004, p. 32-33).

Most notable, however, is the benefit Gray’s (2004) research revealed concerning participants initially uncomfortable with an online collaboration platform. Gray’s (2004) research revealed that online communities of practice provide valid methods of engagement and are an valuable professional resource, even for participants who do not actively collaborate, termed “lurkers” (p. 25). Lurkers are members of an online collaborative community who choose to observe and gain knowledge by reading information provided by active participants. Gray (2004) argues that although members initially do not contribute to the community of practice, the act peripheral engagement is legitimate and typically leads to increased participation. In Feng Lai's (2010) research of the sustainability of online communities of practice he determines “e-learning systems might provide effective and convenient access to information, support communications...and enhance learning opportunities” (p. 1581).

Furthermore, Feng Lai (2010) finds that through online collaboration, not only do learners have the ability to construct their own learning through interaction with online learning materials, but also that lurkers develop a strong sense of community just like their more actively collaborating peers. Viewing this research by Gray (2004) and Feng Lai (2010) through the lens of the community of practice framework reveals a strong connection to situated learning and legitimate
peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Early work by Lave and Wenger (1991) validates Gray’s (2004) and Feng Lai’s (2010) research related to lurkers by stating that legitimate peripheral participation “concerns the process by which newcomers become part of a community of practice” (p. 29).

One of the most prevalent benefits noted throughout the research is the capacity for the creation of collective identity in a community of practice regardless of existing boundaries of time and space (Gray, 2004; Kreijins et al., 2003; Feng Lai, 2010; Lock, 2006; Yin, 2010; Zyl, 2008). In contrast, face-to-face collaboration can create its own form of professional isolation. Frequently, outcomes resulting from face-to-face collaboration remain isolated within the members of a community of practice thereby limiting the potential for professional growth (Sandifer, 2011). Online collaboration practices can remove the professional silos of isolation that often plague communities of practice. The addition of an online collaborative environment can cause a loosely tied group of people to develop into members of an emotionally invested community (Ke and Hoadley, 2009).

Educator and author Stephanie Sandifer (2011) believes that online collaboration results in “a more collaborative culture focused on learning and results” (p. 31). Sandifer is an expert in the use of wikis in schools and in her experience, has found that effective online collaborative environments cannot replace traditional face-to-face collaboration practices, but rather should be used to maximize meaning and productivity by providing a collaborative environment to record and maintain all varieties of data and information (Sandifer, 2011). While the literature regarding online communities of practice is primarily favorable, it is important to note that teacher resistance to technology integration is prevalent in schools.
Teacher Resistance to Technology Integration

Despite the prevalence of literature regarding the benefits of online collaboration, there is another faction of literature addressing the challenges of technology integration faced by educators. As the use of technology in schools has increased over the past several years, an issue of detachment and aversion to the integration of technological tools by experienced teachers has come to light (Sandifer, 2011; Sessums, 2012; Howard, 2013; Orlando, 2014). Speaking to teacher resistance to technology integration, Sandifer (2011) states “It is easy to avoid changing practice when ‘the old way’ is more comfortable, even when the old way is less efficient and less effective” (p.xix). Similar in message and tone, in the afterword to What School Leaders Need to Know About Digital Technologies and Social Media, Christopher Sessums (2012) describes many schools integrating technology as “giant dysfunctional families whose members don’t speak to each other and pursue their own short-term agendas despite district initiatives and state standards...” (pg. 183). Sessums (2012) continues by stating that teachers are not the ones to blame for the dysfunction due to ill-equipped efforts to prepare teachers for successful technology integration.

As a way to address the aforementioned challenges, several researchers and educators have conducted studies and published texts to providing insight on how organizations can best move forward with technology integration. One of which researcher is Australian, Sara Howard (2013), who sought to understand teachers’ experiences and beliefs related to educational technology through a qualitative analysis of teacher interviews. Howard (2013) approached her study from the following mindset, “Teachers who do not integrate technology are often labelled as ‘resistant’ to change. Yet, considerable uncertainties remain about appropriate uses and actual value of technology in teaching and learning, which can make integration and change seem
risky” (p. 357). The research conducted by Howard (2013) intended to fill a gap in the research and literature regarding “the complexities within teachers’ resistance to technology integration” by analyzing teachers’ perceived risks to technology integration (p. 358). A year following publication of Howard’s (2013) findings, another Australian researcher, Joanne Orlando (2014) had a study published that specifically examined veteran teachers’ resistance to technology integration (veteran teachers were defined as having twenty years or more experience). Similar to Howard’s (2013) study, Orlando’s (2014) research was also qualitative in design and addressed what could be viewed as teacher perceptions regarding technology integration. The results of both studies show that what is oftentimes perceived as resistance of technology integration by teachers, is actually much more complex in nature (Howard, 2013; Orlando, 2014).

A common finding in the two studies relates directly to teacher identity. Howard (2013) found that when teachers are expected to make “significant changes to their teaching practice” their identities are at stake which can result in feelings of lower self-efficacy and decreased motivation (p.357). The idea of teachers’ identities being at stake is referred to as a “cultural dilemma” by Orlando (2014, p.431). Orlando (2014) argues that this cultural dilemma experienced by veteran teachers integrating technology, partially resulted from “a loss of status in the school staff” (p.431). Veteran teachers perceived that teachers with higher levels of technological proficiency, regardless of their number of years in teaching, experienced higher levels of status within schools than their veteran counterparts (Orlando, 2014). The cultural dilemma identified by Orlando (2014) extended to the fact that for the first time, veteran teachers were experiencing a situation where many of their students possessed higher levels of
proficiency and knowledge around technology than they did, turning the status quo of school hierarchy on its head.

Both researchers discuss the implications of their work for school leadership and the importance of appropriate support for teachers experiencing technology integration. Recommendations made by Orlando (2014) are quite general and primarily refer to addressing the cultural dilemma created by technology integration through the inclusion of veteran teachers in the creation of a vision of technology in schools. Howard’s (2013) recommendations are much more specific and aim to reduce the issue of risk perception by teachers, as it relates to technology integration: (a) teachers need “opportunities to gain familiarity with technology tools to reduce feelings of dread and anxiety” (p.369); (b) teacher expectations for technology use should be directly aligned with school and staff goals. Both studies found teacher resistance to technology integration as either an emotional outcome of fear and anxiety resulting from low self-efficacy or a perceived change in status; and their recommendations are a reminder to school leaders to remain mindful of experienced teachers as they develop an implementation framework for technology integration (Howard, 2013; Orlando, 2014).

While technology integration can pose issues with implementation of online collaboration practices, it is important to note that use of a proper online, collaborative environment is crucial. The participants of this study are only a few of the more than 40 million students and educators who use Google Apps for Education’s suite of productivity tools. Ease of access and familiarity with the product solidified its choice as the online platform for use in the study.

**Google Apps for Education and Teacher Collaboration**

In 2014, the study site adopted Google Apps for Education as a tool for improving instruction and learning. Google advertises Google Apps for Education as a “free suite of
productivity tools for classroom collaboration” (Google, n.d.). While Google offers similar tools targeting businesses, government and other non-profit organizations, the scope of this review is limited to the education suite of tools available to K-12 school districts and higher education institutions (Herrick, 2009; Google, n.d.). Currently, the Google Apps for Education suite includes the following tools: Classroom, Gmail, Drive, Calendar, Docs, Sheets, Slides, and Sites (Google, n.d.). Each application is web-based and can be accessed and used cross-platform without any additional software or infrastructure support (Herrick, 2009). Additionally, the applications make use of offline caching providing access and functionality for use even when the internet is unavailable.

In her research on student and instructor perspectives of the collaborative benefits of Google Apps for Education in post-secondary education, Cahill (2011) found that the online suite’s ability to maintain function both cross-platform and off-line eliminates the concern of many common technology issues that can impede collaborative practices:

1. Work and data loss resulting from a computer crash or faulty external memory storage device;
2. Productivity loss due to differing platforms at home and school;
3. Scheduling conflicts due to electronic calendars on platforms that do not have the ability to be shared; and
4. The need to schedule collaboration at an agreed upon, date, time and location.

(Cahill, 2011, p. 35)

Throughout the reviewed literature, a recurring theme exists: online tool suites like Google Apps for Education allow learners, whether they be students, teachers or administrators, to focus their time and energy on creating, sharing, and collaborating rather than managing
technology platforms or troubleshooting technology concerns (Awuah, 2015; Cahill, 2011; Gaudin, 2010; Herrick, 2009; Keiser & Golden, 2009; Laufenberg & Wagner, 2012). In addition to the technical advantages offered by the online productivity suite, Google Apps for Education makes it simple for users to share work and receive synchronous feedback, which Laufenberg and Wagner (2012) found to be “a large motivator for students to engage in dynamic learning processes” (p. 138). This sentiment was echoed by Awuah (2015) who wrote, “A typical example is how Google Docs facilitates ease of collaboration with multiple editors to simultaneously make changes to the same document in real time” (p.16). In the article “21st Century Teaching and Learning: The Role for Google Apps for Education (GAFE)” Awuah provides numerous additional examples of how Google Apps for Education can facilitate synchronous feedback among collaborators:

With revision history, users can easily see all changes with different time-stamps, compare different versions of the same document, merge documents, as well as revert to previous versions of a document. Additionally, users can use the chat tool for discussions, while the owner of the document can grant access rights to users with different roles such as viewers of collaborators (p.16).

Considering the number of technological tools available within the Google Apps for Education suite, there is opportunity for individuals with little technological background to experience perceived risk-aversion (Howard, 2013). However, a recent usability study, conducted in the United States, provides ample evidence that adult students find Google Apps for Education easy to use and appreciate the ability provided for online collaboration (Brown & Hocutt, 2015). Data was collected from fifty-four students at a small, liberal arts college, where at the beginning of the study 83 percent of the participants indicated they had never or rarely
used Google Apps for Education (Brown & Hocutt, 2015, p. 163). The authors chose to assess the following Google Apps for Education tasks performed by adult students: account setup, login process, visual interface/visceral design, text styling, icons, adding comments, reading comments, sharing files or folders, collaborating with others, revision history, cloud-based access and storage, synchronous chat, platform, browser, location of use, familiarity with the interface prior to exposure (Brown & Hocutt, 2015, p.165). The results of the study show student perceptions reflected an overall sense of usefulness for each of the functions listed above, with collaboration, document sharing and commenting receiving the highest ratings of usefulness. Synchronous chat was viewed as the least useful, although its mean score still indicated it as a somewhat useful function of Google Apps for Education. Overall, the results of the study indicate that Google Apps for Education is easy to use, even for those without prior experience using the tools.

In the process of reviewing literature for this study, Laufenberg and Wagner's (2012) chapter addressing the use of online tool suites, in What School Leaders Need to Know About Digital Technologies and Social Media, was one of only two pieces of literature to bridge student learning to teacher learning and professional growth. Laufenberg and Wagner (2012) state:

For all the same reasons that online tool suites are beneficial for student learning, the integrated applications serve teacher professional pursuits as well. Calendar sharing with departments or grade levels, collaborating on interdisciplinary unit planning, and organizing school-wide events all serve to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the non-instructional side of the teaching profession. (Laufenberg & Wagner, 2012, p. 138)

The second piece of literature with specific reference to teachers collaborating with Google Apps for Education is by Rienzo and Han (2009). Their research comparing Microsoft Office Online
and Google Apps for Education for course management at Western Michigan University found that use of Google Apps for Education facilitates teacher collaboration (Rienzo & Han, 2009). Instructors at Western Michigan University began sharing live Google docs and Google sheets with one another rather than emailing static documents and spreadsheets where one person was responsible for maintaining the most up-to-date version. Collaborating with Google Apps for Education took weeklong processes and reduced them to completion in under a day (Rienzo & Han, 2009). The instructors at Western Michigan University began using Google apps for Education to collaborate about simple processes like scheduling labs and lectures but quickly moved to more complex collaboration focused on common instruction and assessment practices (Rienzo & Han, 2009).

The reviewed literature related to Google Apps for Education demonstrates that the popular tool suite facilitates improved instruction and learning for both staff and students. This occurs through the elimination of common technology issues and the ease of collaboration between users. Additionally, a usability study published in 2015 found that Google Apps for Education is easy to use, even for those who have no previous experience using the tool suite (Brown & Hocutt, 2015). Google Apps for Education is “focused on changing the way people work, providing them tools to work seamlessly across time and space” (Gaudin, 2010).

Conclusion

Based on the review of existing literature, it is evident that ample research has been conducted regarding the topics of teacher professional development, communities of practice, collegial interaction and collaboration, online collaboration and learning, teacher resistance to technology and Google Apps for Education. However, this literature review also indicates that
Further qualitative research is necessary to understand the lived-experiences of educators transitioning to a blended model of collaborative practice.

Analysis of the literature led to the following primary conclusions about the current state of knowledge. First and foremost, the literature overwhelmingly indicates that the practice of teacher collaboration is the common thread to the effective use of communities of practice to address issues in education, professional growth in teachers and increases in academic achievement by students, what online collaboration looks like for educators and the role Google Apps can play in the facilitation of teacher collaboration (Awuah, 2015; Cahill, 2011; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Derven, 2009; DuFour & Mattos, 2013; Enthoven & De Brujin, 2010; Feng Lai, 2010; Ferriter & Graham, 2010; Gaudin, 2010; Gray, 2004; Herrick, 2009; Keiser & Golden, 2009; Kreijins et al., 2003; Laufenberg & Wagner, 2012; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Lock, 2006; Lieberman, 1995; Ronfeldt et al., 2015; Schmoker, 2006; Smylie et al., 2001; Trilling & Fadel, 2009; Yin, 2010; Zyl, 2008). Secondly, the existing literature demonstrates that as the demands on public school teachers in the United States increase, the time permitted for common face-to-face collaboration will cease to meet their needs (Cahill, 2011; Derven, 2009; Gaudin, 2010). Third, the existing literature highlighted that Google Apps for Education as the premier cloud-based platform for both synchronous and asynchronous online collaboration (Awuah, 2015; Brown & Hocutt, 2015; Gaudin, 2010; Laufenberg & Wagner, 2012; Rienzo & Han, 2009).

Considering the primary conclusions derived from the existing literature, there are considerable gaps. The first topic noticeably absent in the literature is that of blended collaboration. While sufficient knowledge exists regarding both face-to-face collaboration and online collaboration, research surrounding blended collaborative practice is noticeably absent
(Darling-Hammond & Mclaughlin, 1995; DuFour & Mattos, 2013; Ferriter & Graham, 2010; Gaudin, 2010; Gray, 2004; Laufenberg & Wagner, 2012; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Lock, 2006; Lieberman, 1995; Ronfeldt et al., 2015; Schmoker, 2006; Smylie et al., 2001; Trilling & Fadel, 2009; Yin, 2010; Zyl, 2008). The existing literature also indicates a need for descriptive, pragmatic implications for schools transitioning their face-to-face collaborative practice to a blended model. Therefore, this narrative inquiry was conducted to fill a void in the literature, as well as provide descriptive, pragmatic implications for schools transitioning to a blended mode of collaboration.

This literature review provided the foundation of knowledge on which this study was designed. Given the need for research regarding educators transitioning their mode of collaboration from a face-to-face model to a blended model, a narrative inquiry was designed and conducted, which will be explained in detail in Chapter three. Finally, the research question posed in this study contributed pertinent data on the subject: How do four secondary educators at a Midwest, urban high school describe and process their experiences transitioning their face-to-face collaboration practices to a blended model that includes the use of online collaborative tools?
Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this narrative inquiry is to explore the lived experiences of four secondary educators as they transitioned their mode of collaboration from face-to-face to a blended model in a Midwest, urban high school. This research will aid other schools as they make their transition to collaboration in a blended environment. Listening to the voices of teachers has the potential to guide the path for all educators collaborating in a collective effort to meet the various learning needs of their students. The primary question of this research was: How do four secondary educators at a Midwest, urban high school describe and process their experiences transitioning their face-to-face collaboration practices to a blended model that includes the use of online collaborative tools?

The first section of this chapter presents the rationale for the choice of qualitative as the overarching research design, as well as the rationale for narrative inquiry as the specific research approach. The second section includes research procedures: participants, recruitment and access, data collection, data storage, data analysis, limitations, ethical considerations, positionality and trustworthiness.

Qualitative Research Approach

A qualitative approach to research allows for the exploration of a problem where inductive and deductive methods are used to gather data that can only be collected by talking to people (Creswell, 2013). The goal of qualitative research is to make sense of the meaning people assign a problem and how that meaning relates to the existing literature (Creswell, 2012). Creswell (2012) outlines the following four philosophical assumptions made by researchers conducting a qualitative study:

- The ontological assumption that qualitative research embraces multiple realities;
● The epistemological assumption that qualitative researchers gain valuable knowledge through getting to know the research participants;

● The axiological assumption that the researcher makes their own values transparent within a qualitative study; and

● The methodological assumption that the procedures of qualitative research are shaped by the researcher’s experiences with the data.

Connelly and Clandinin (2000) describe narrative inquiry as a “multi-layered and many stranded” tradition of qualitative research methodology that “is the study of ways humans experience the world” (1990, p. 2). The focus of human experience naturally lends itself to the field of educational research and this study. Viewing learning as a narrative process allows for an emphasis on how “learners use their frame of reference to make meaning” (Yukawa, 2005, p. 205). This study focused on making meaning of experiences of four educators who chose to transition their face-to-face collaboration to a blended model. A qualitative research method that values human experience, participant reflection, and the voices of the participants is most appropriate in research such as this, where the study findings are not dependent upon proving or disproving a specific hypothesis (Pietkowitz & Smith, 2014).

**Narrative Research Approach**

This study explored how the members of a community of educators experienced transitioning their face-to-face collaboration to a blended format through the inclusion of an online environment. Given the nature of the research a qualitative study employing a narrative approach provided a clear voice for the participants as they expanded the physical and professional boundaries of their collaborative practice. Narrative inquiry is a specific research tradition that offers close insights into the meaning people construct from their experiences.
Clandinin (2006) defines narrative inquiry as the following, “Narrative methodology as a methodology entails a view of the phenomenon. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular narrative view of experiences as phenomena under study” (Clandinin, p. 477). Simply stated, narrative inquiry offers the unique ability to capture and interpret lived experiences in storied form.

The narrative inquiry methodology is commonly used to study phenomena in nursing (Barton, 2006), anthropology (Bateson, 1994), cross-cultural studies (Andrews, 2006), as well as other domains favorable to qualitative research. The first reference pointing to the use of narrative inquiry in education was published in 1990, by Clandinin and Connelly, which makes it a relatively new methodology in educational research (Clandinin, Pushor & Orr, 2007). The methodology of narrative inquiry maintains a multitude of meanings across researchers. Depending on the field of study, narratives can take many forms, from impromptu discourse or resulting from responses to explicit research questions (Clausen, 1998). Generally speaking, “narrative inquiry means different things to different inquirers” (Xu & Connelly, 2010, p. 351).

In the field of educational research, narrative inquiry is guided by the practice of educators. Xu and Connelly (2010) note that “for this line of work the concepts of narrative inquiry are driven by practice and by a theoretical idea of the practical,” (p. 354). This line of thinking believes that instead of action and improvement resulting from understanding (as in many other research fields and methodologies), it is understanding that results from action and improvement (Xu & Connelly, 2010). It is for this reason that narrative inquiry is an appropriate methodology for studies focusing on the interpretation of the lived experiences of educators (Oliver, 1998).
This narrative inquiry studied the ways four educators in a Midwestern, urban high school experienced the transition of their face-to-face collaborative practice to a blended format with the addition of an online collaborative environment. The approach utilizes results from a relatively new narrative inquiry framework developed by Clandinin, Pushor, and Orr (2007). The basis of this model can be found in the curriculum work of Schwab (1978) is specifically designed to study mindful educators with a desire to improve their professional practice. Similar to Schwab’s (1978) commonplaces of curriculum, in 2006, Clandinin and Connelly identified three commonplaces of narrative inquiry - temporality, sociality, and place. Although these commonplaces may be found in other traditions of qualitative research either isolated or in combination, narrative inquiry requires simultaneous attendance to all three commonplaces.

Developing on the three commonplaces of narrative inquiry, Clandinin, Pushor, and Orr (2007) proposed “A framework of elements for designing, living out, and representing narrative inquiries” (p.24). This framework involves eight elements and guides the conversations and thinking necessary to successfully employ a narrative inquiry. Clandinin, Pushor, and Orr (2007) have found that to be effective the three commonplaces – temporality, sociality, and space – must be used as a lens for which to view the eight elements listed below:

1. Justification - narrative inquiries must heed three distinct justifications: the personal, the practical, and the social; (p. 24)
2. Defining the phenomenon - as justifications develop, the “what” of the narrative inquiry becomes clear; (p. 25)
3. Consideration of the methods used to research the phenomenon - “to plan a narrative is to plan to be self-consciously aware of everything happening with that life space”; (p. 27)
4. Analysis and interpretation processes - the analysis and interpretation processes become apparent when the commonplaces built into the study are examined, described, and specified; (p. 28)

5. Positioning the narrative inquiry - in contrast to many narrative inquirers, Clandinin, Pushor, and Orr (2007) challenge that narrative studies must be positioned in relation to other related research; (p. 29)

6. Uniqueness - it is important for narrative inquiries to offer an understanding of what is learned through the narrative inquiry process, and could otherwise not have been gleaned through other, more traditional theories and methods; (p. 30)

7. Ethical considerations - due to the intimate nature of narrative research, ethical considerations require special consideration; (p. 30)

8. Representation of the research - narrative inquiry is more than telling a story. Its foundation is built from a set of, “ontological and methodological assumptions”; (p. 31)

It is narrative inquiry’s concern with groups and the formation of community that make it an ideal methodological choice for this study (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

**Research Site and Participants**

This study took place at a public, urban high school located in the Midwest, with a population of approximately 800 students, 65 certified staff members and three administrators. The racial breakdown of the student population is 80.6 percent white, 9 percent Hispanic and 7.9 percent Black, which is commensurate with the city in which the school resides (Missouri Comprehensive Data System, n.d.). The graduating class of 2016 reported 34.9 percent of students enrolling in a 4-year college or university, 7.9 percent enrolling in a 2-year college and
3.2 percent enrolling in a 2-year postsecondary technical school (Missouri Comprehensive Data System, 2016). The public school district in which the research site resides, consists of twenty-six school buildings: one early learning center, sixteen elementary schools serving grades K-6, four middle schools serving grades 7-8, three high schools serving grades 9-12, one alternative school housing multiple student populations, and one technical school serving grades 9 – adult. The school district averages a student population of approximately 12,000 students and 1,100 certified staff (Missouri Comprehensive Data System, 2016). The surrounding school community primarily consists blue-collar and transient households, with a major pork plant being the primary employer in the school community. Four years ago, two-thirds of the administrative team was replaced due to a negative school culture, lagging scores on state and national assessments, and a lack of confidence by the community and central office administration. Since that time about half of the certified staff positions have turned over, however the school culture and support from the surrounding community has dramatically improved.

Convenience sampling was used for this study. This sampling method provides easy access and data collection from a specific site (Creswell, 2007) and is an asset in qualitative inquiry (Biklen & Casells, 2007). Convenience sampling allowed for an “intimate familiarity” with the professional lives of the participants and school site while the study was being conducted (Biklen & Casells, 2007), which is a vital component to a successful narrative inquiry.

Prior to the start of this research, the selected participants had a strong history of collaborating, face-to-face, as a community of educators teaching in the same department. For several years, face-to-face collaboration for the participants’ department had been built into the school site’s master schedule, allowing for ninety minutes of collaboration time every other
school day. A specific format or structure for collaboration was not prescribed by district or building leadership, therefore each department had the autonomy to determine their own method for structuring their ninety-minute scheduled collaboration. The department chair facilitated the scheduled collaboration occurring within the study participants’ department and topics included but were not limited to the following: curriculum implementation, use of instructional and curriculum resources, formative data analysis, summative data analysis, developing common assessments, student behavior and management, common lesson planning in the department and special education teachers. All participants are certified teachers in a 9-12, public high school located in a Midwest, urban, school district. Participants consisted of four secondary educators working in the same department at the same school site. Three of the participants are female and one is male. One is African-American while three are Caucasians and the participants’ ages range between 22 and 50. Their level of experience varies greatly, ranging from novice to over twenty years of classroom experience. Additionally, two of the participants also teach at the college level.

**Recruitment and Access**

The recruitment strategy for this study was straightforward and based on a selection of teachers participating in an existing face-to-face collaborative practice with a desire to expand to an online collaborative environment. Initial thoughts on recruitment efforts focused on the schools within the local school district. However, further consideration of the necessity of the strong relationships and trust required for a successful narrative inquiry refocused plans for recruitment on this researcher’s own school site (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Clandinin, Pushor and Orr (2007) describe the necessity of trust in narrative inquiry in this manner:

We feel it is important to carefully consider the comfort teachers and teacher educators
feel with research that attends to stories. Stories are the form in which we and other teachers and teacher educators most often represent our experiences. Stories, ripe with possibility for inquiry, surround and envelope us as teachers and teacher educators. They are the woven fabric of school landscapes. (Clandinin, et al., 2007, p. 33).

Trust is key in obtaining authentic stories in a narrative inquiry, therefore relationships of trust between all participants and the researcher had been previously established diminishing the time necessary to build relationships suitable to the study’s purpose. All possible participants were required to review an explanation of the study and the criteria, as explained in the Informed Consent (Appendix B).

Initial contact with teacher participants occurred through a letter of invitation (Appendix B) whereupon appointments were made with those who agreed to participate in the study; informed consent was obtained (Appendix C). The small number of participants allows for extensive data to be collected from each participant maintaining focus to the intimate nature of narrative inquiry methodology. The participants are all certified secondary teachers who currently participate in a departmental model of face-to-face, collaborative, professional development. While 100 percent participant anonymity cannot be guaranteed, pseudonyms were assigned at the time of data collection and it is not possible for comments or dialogue to be tied to a specific participant. Identifying data such as school district name, colleague names, some professional background information, and specific dates have also been omitted or changed.

Biographical information as well as information pertaining to education background and professional experience was obtained through the interview process. Each participant described their professional history leading to their current teaching position. This information was relevant to understanding two of the commonplaces of narrative inquiry - temporality and
sociality. Defining temporality provides an understanding of the people, place, and events as an ongoing process and as always in transition. Understanding the sociality of the participants reveals their “existential conditions, the environment, surrounding factors and forces, people and otherwise, that form each individual’s context” (Clandinin, Pushor & Orr, 2007, p. 23).

The sample size of a narrative inquiry is small in comparison to other qualitative studies utilizing different qualitative methodologies, resulting in possible questions of generalizability. It is important to note that narrative inquiry relies on “criteria other than validity, reliability, and generalizability” (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, p. 7). More relevant criteria would include “apparencty, verisimilitude, and transferability” (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, p. 7). In the field of educational research, and particularly this study of teacher experiences with blended collaboration within a community of practice, the use of narrative inquiry provides a clearer understanding of how communities of educators “construct unique personal practical knowledge about the world as well as the tensions involved in the social transactions continually taking place among multiple educators in the same or different places on the professional knowledge landscape” (Olson and Craig, 2001, p. 669).

**Data Collection**

This study includes unstructured, in-depth, narrative interviews with four educators at the same Midwest, urban high school. Although all participants were members of the collaborating department, it was the participants’ individual experiences and reflections that constructed meaning. Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2000) describe the usefulness of this interpretive approach in conducting the narrative interview:

Different social groups construct different stories, and the ways in which they differ are crucial to apprehend the full dynamics of events. Different perspectives may highlight a
different axis as well as a different sequence in the chronological events. Furthermore, difference in perspectives may establish different configuration in the selection of events to be included in the whole narrative. (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000, p. 67)

While narrative interviews are considered to be unstructured, influence is typically reduced by structuring the role of the interviewer. The approach “elicit[s] a less imposed and therefore more ‘valid’ rendering of the informant’s perspective” (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000, p. 60). In the case of this research study, an interview guide was developed using the technique of Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2000) which is based on the work of German, social researcher Schutze (unpublished, 1977).

The elicitation technique reduces the formal role of the interviewer by avoiding the question-answer type of interview, and instead uses “everyday communication, namely story-telling and listening” (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000, p. 60). This interview technique, as outlined by Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2000), identifies four phases. Focusing on stories, rather than questions and answers, provides a more complete perspective through the collection of spontaneous language by the interviewee. In accordance with Etienne Wenger’s (2004) community of practice framework, both the main narration and questioning phases of the study focus on the collection of data relative to the following three areas: (a) the domain; (b) the community; and (c) the practice (Appendix C). Interviews lasted between 60 and 180 minutes and closely followed the five phases outlined below.

1. Initiation – The research participant is given a broad context of the study and permission to record all interviews is obtained in order to support proper data collection and analysis. Initiation of the narration process should occur as a result of introduction to the study.
2. Main Narration – The researcher is restricted to active-listening during this phase. Once participant narration begins, the narrative must not be interrupted until, “…there is a clear coda, meaning the interviewee pauses and signals the end of their story,” (p. 62).

3. Questioning – When the participant’s narration has ended, probing questions may be asked by the researcher. Exmanent questions developed by the researcher are then translated into immanent questions using the language of the participant. Exmanent issues and questions are steeped in the thinking and language of the researcher. Immanent issues, or those issues communicated in the language of the participant(s), are then generated from the earlier identified exmanent questions. Simply stated, the research issues and questions are translated into a more comfortable language for the participant.

4. Concluding Talk – Concluding talk provides a relaxed time for discussion that frequently develops interesting discussions. Data from this phase is not collected by a recording device, but rather in written form. The contextual information gained in this phase is crucial to the contextual interpretation of the participant’s account.

(Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000, p. 62)

In addition to the collection of participant data, the researcher composed field texts throughout the course of the study. The intent of the field texts is two-fold. Field texts are composed to accurately reflect participants’ responses throughout the research process as well as to document the many vantage points and reflections of the researcher.
Data Storage

Each interview was digitally recorded and transcribed with transcription data stored in electronic format on a password-protected MacBook Air. Each participant gave permission for the digital recording of the interview on the Informed Consent Form (Appendix B). The researcher maintained additional data consisting of interview notes reflecting physical or emotional responses in addition to the data collected in the fourth phase of the interview. All interview notes were scanned and saved electronically, with the originals stored at the researcher’s home. As noted earlier, assigning pseudonyms at the start of the study preserved anonymity of the participants. A list of the participants’ names and pseudonyms is stored in a location separate from other related data.

Data Analysis

Analysis of this study was framed using Clandinin and Connelly’s (1990) three-part methodology for analysis of narrative inquiry. The first component of the analysis is termed broadening. Broadening situates the inquiry into a more generalized perspective, and typically results from generating field texts from multiple sources. Burrowing is the second component and emanates from focusing on the “event’s emotional, moral, and aesthetic qualities” returning to the origin of the event for the participant, yielding a focused perspective for restorying the event according to the perspective, “of the person at the time the event occurred,” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990, p. 11). Clandinin and Connelly’s (1990) third element for analysis of narrative inquiry is restorying based on the meaning of the event and its “present and future considerations” (p. 11). Even more critical to the aspect of restorying is the exploration of meaning and the creation of a new narrative by adjusting the focus for future significance.
In this study, narrative data was collected through semi-structured interviews with participants, ranging from 60 minutes to 180 minutes in length. As the interviews were individually completed, the recorded narrative data was transcribed using the Rev voice recorder phone application. Each participant’s interview transcript and related field texts were provided to the participants to ensure their story was accurately represented through the interview process. The next step in the analysis process was to read the transcript of each participant’s story multiple times, over the course of several days. Broadening transpired through viewing the data with the purpose of providing a general context to the department’s transition to a blended collaborative practice. This occurred by recording initial thoughts, impressions and questions that emerged from multiple readings of the transcripts and field texts. Each participant’s transcript was approached as a unique story and individual perspective of the department’s transition to a blended collaborative practice. When the burrowing process was complete, transcripts were then color coded to identify common storied patterns throughout the participants’ narrative data. Collectively reflecting on each interview, the resulting notes and color coded patterns led to the emergence of multiple categories. Related categories were then refined and grouped together, resulting in four conceptual themes guided by the community of practice framework. As a method of rechecking, indications of each of the conceptual themes were then color coded on clean interview transcripts.

The creation of new meaning and the development of a new narrative with future significance occurred through the restorying process. The restorying process involved additional readings and analysis of interview transcripts, field notes and research notes. Data was then organized into a sequence that allowed for the participants’ stories to be woven together to create new meaning. Member-checking with the study participants occurred frequently throughout the
restorying process, ensuring the perspective of the participants was accurate and clear in the final narrative.

**Limitations**

Although this study’s goal of gathering the stories of the participants’ lived experiences was met, there are several limitations that must be noted. Given the small sample size and homogeneous demographics, claims of generalization cannot be made. Results may not be generalizable within other high schools in dissimilar geographic or demographic settings, and results may also not be similar if conducted in a post-secondary, elementary, middle school or technical school environment. However, results may be transferable if the same study were to be conducted at a high school site operating under similar conditions.

Another limitation of the study is the lack of breadth across members of the study site’s department. The study included narratives from four of the eight members of the study site’s department. Participant interviews were conducted during the summer breaks, making it difficult to secure the remaining four department members for participation in the study. Having all members of the study site’s members’ department participate in the study would have allowed a richer, more comprehensive perspective. Additionally, data was collected from participants with varying levels of prior experience with Google Apps for Education, as well as both traditional and online collaboration practices. Also, participants had opportunities to speak with one another between scheduled interviews allowing them to anticipate the researcher’s questions.

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations, as they pertain to this study, encompassed informed consent procedures including, but not limited to, identification of the researcher, sponsoring institution and research purpose, as well as a participant confidentiality guarantee (Creswell, 2009).
Participation in the research did not present any obvious risks to the participants. This project documents experiences of the participants and did not result in adverse consequences for the study participants, school district employees or its students. Therefore, participation in this study did not cause any risk to the welfare or rights of the participants. Rather, participants could find benefits in the experience with professional growth and understanding resulting from professional action and improvement (Xu & Connelly, 2010). Participation in this study was voluntary and selection non-discriminatory. Data resulting from the study was not used for evaluation purposes, and research results were reported without revealing participant identity. Furthermore, identification of the participants has been concealed in any interview transcripts, and recordings were destroyed after transcription.

In addition to the inherent ethical considerations and limitations of this study, the role of the researcher presented special consideration. A critical challenge of this study concerned teachers as participants and a site administrator as the primary researcher. However, the fact that this study did not focus on the interactions of the participants with the researcher, but rather participant interactions with one another reduced the potential for ethical dilemma. While this researcher was not assigned as an evaluator of any of the study participants, it is possible participants may have viewed the researcher as a superior which could have influenced participants’ responses.

As an employee of the school district in which the research occurred, approval to conduct research was obtained through the district’s Data Task Force operated by the Office of Assessment and Program Evaluation. The application process included an outline of benefits to the school district, a research design summary, an assurance of anonymity of district employees and students, and risks of this research project (Appendix A).
Addressing Bias and Positionality

Qualitative researchers must “position themselves” in their research because their backgrounds have the potential to inform “the interpretation of the information of the study” (Creswell, 2012, p. 47). This concern is no different for this narrative inquiry. I have a deep interest in professional learning and collaboration that emanate from learning experiences in my professional career as a teacher at the elementary, middle and secondary levels, an instructional coach at both middle and high school, and administrative roles in two very different high schools, as well as a K-12 alternative school. As the primary researcher and an administrator, it was important to reflect on how professional experiences have formed perspective of the research topic, and detail my own biases and positionality on the problem of practice. Aside from my daily administrative duties, I have always been a practicing researcher searching for more effective means to meet the needs of both students and staff. Currently in my eleventh year as a building administrator, I am an active practitioner in the area of school improvement. As a doctoral candidate in a program blending face-to-face and online instruction, I frequently find indications of the need for refinement in the study site’s collaborative practice.

I have had the opportunity to experience the role of building administrator from three very diverse school sites. The first five years of my administrative career occurred at a very high-performing, suburban high school located in a wealthy, neighboring community. Prior to being hired as an assistant principal at the school, the teaching staff were highly trained in the professional learning communities (PLC) model. PLC structures and expectations already existed as part of the fabric of the staff culture and with low staff turnover teachers collaborated using the PLC model with a high level of fidelity, professional growth and student success. It
was an ideal experience for a new building administrator and provided a strong foundation in how successful schools operate as communities of practice.

My next administrative experience was as the principal of a small, K-12 alternative school located in the town in which I reside. The local community has a population of approximately 80,000 residents who are largely blue-collar and two of the major employers in the city include a pork processing plant and a state prison. My time leading the alternative school spanned a brief two years, however with a small staff we quickly grew into a strong community of practice and developed a culture of collegial trust with the end results being continuous professional growth and student success.

It was during my tenure at the alternative school that the local district began a dramatic downward spiral focused on crisis management resulting from lawsuits, FBI and federal grand jury investigations, continuous negative press, staff distrust, and high employee turnover. In early 2013, I was notified that due to my previous high school administrative experience I would be transferred to a low-performing, urban high school of 800 students where two-thirds of the administrative team resigned or were reassigned to other duties. The school resonated professional distrust and closed doors, the facility was in disrepair, and high-performing teachers feared ridicule from their peers.

As the new administrative team our initial focus was to immediately begin building a solid, healthy community within and surrounding the school. We led this effort by building trust and taking purposeful care of our staff, students and families, and then expecting them to do the same for each other. While the school district remains ensnared in turmoil, our school is now a strong, caring community and the teaching staff is ripe to grow in their professional practice. The past two school years the administrative team has been fortunate to have the capacity to
build a master schedule incorporating weekly, face-to-face collaboration time for core departments. However, weekly face-to-face collaboration was not providing sufficient time to make the professional growth necessary to adequately affect instruction and achieve departmental and building goals. These diverse experiences as an administrator combined with supporting research like the study conducted by The Consortium of Chicago School Research (2001) indicated that it was time to progress to a school whose teaching staff has the ability to continuously operate as a community of practice “growing professionally in a collaborative workplace environment with reflective dialog and shared norms focused on improvement and professional growth” (Smylie et al., 2001, p. 50).

The researcher has extensive experience as both a participant and leader of various communities of practice, both face-to-face and online in format. These experiences have led to a passionate interest in combining face-to-face collaborative practices with online collaboration to create a blended community of practice. Recognizing the bias that my professional experiences bring to this study, helped to identify the steps necessary to keep my own presumptions in check during the research process of this study, as well as in the results resulting from the data analysis. The following strategies were employed to ensure trustworthiness, as well as those used throughout the narrative and data analysis process were designed to monitor and limit potential bias by this researcher.

**Trustworthiness**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) established four criteria for trustworthiness to be considered by researchers conducting a qualitative study: credibility (in preference to internal validity), transferability (in preference to external validity/generalizability), dependability (in preference to reliability), and confirmability (in preference to objectivity) (Shenton, 2004). The criteria
identified by Lincoln and Guba (1985) was employed to ensure trustworthiness and validity throughout the course of this study.

To ensure credibility in a qualitative study, it is imperative that participants trust the “integrity of the processes” framing the research process (Stringer, 2007). Credibility can be achieved through appropriate research methods, prolonged engagement or the “development of early familiarity with the culture of participating organisations” (Shenton, 2004, p. 65), triangulation between multiple sources of data, and member checking to provide participants opportunities to clarify and extend additional information to the research (Shenton, 2004; Stringer, 2007). The relationship with the chosen study site offered an understanding of the school culture and provided a prior establishment of strong relationships with the participants, thereby resulting in open and honest narrative data. In an effort to member-check, each participant was asked to review their interview transcript to evaluate the accuracy of their words and intended meaning, and on several occasions participants were contacted to clarify and provide additional information to address questions that were exposed through the data analysis process.

Transferability of this study is demonstrated through the “detailed description of the context(s), activities, and events...reported as part of the outcomes of the study” (Stringer, 2007, p.59). This was achieved through providing sufficient thick descriptions of participant experiences and relationships that occurred providing context to the narrative data (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). The thick descriptions achieved in this study make it “possible for people who were not part of the study to make judgements about whether or not the situation is sufficiently similar to their own for the outcomes to be applied” (Stringer, 2007, p.59).
The third and fourth criteria of trustworthiness identified by Lincoln and Guba (1985) are dependability and credibility. While dependability ensures that a systematic research process has been followed and could be repeated with consistent findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Stringer, 2007), confirmability assures that the procedures described actually occurred (Shenton, 2004; Stringer, 2007). While narrative interviews were the primary data source, triangulation occurred through cross-checking with the researcher’s own field texts containing multiple data sources including but not limited to observations. The field texts were maintained in an effort to reflect participants’ physical or emotional responses in addition to the narrative data. Triangulation occurred in order to reduce researcher bias and ensure that the research results were a product of the data obtained by the participants. The research process used in this study has been thoroughly documented. In addition, an internal audit documenting the ongoing “operational detail of the data gathering” (Shenton, 2004, p. 72) occurred throughout the research process. The internal audit includes raw audio interview data, interview transcripts, field texts, methodology notes, and interview instruments, providing substantial evidence supporting this study and its results.

Summary

The methodology employed to conduct this research was appropriate for this qualitative study. Using a narrative research approach revealed the stories of educators’ lived experiences as they transitioned their mode of collaboration from face-to-face to a blended model in a Midwest, urban high school. The chosen methodology facilitated the narration of stories telling of success and failure. Recommendations for practitioners and future research emerged from the participants’ stories and have the potential to guide other educators transitioning their collaborative practice to a blended model.
Chapter 4: Narratives

The purpose of this narrative inquiry is to explore the experiences of four secondary educators as they expanded their face-to-face collaborative practices to include an online collaborative environment. The four participants were provided pseudonyms; Beau, Hilary, Bev and Lilian, and were asked to share the stories of their lived experiences as secondary educators growing professionally and transitioning their departmental collaboration to include an online environment. The one-to-one interview sessions with each participant, triangulated with field-text notes and personal observations, allowed this researcher to delve deeply into the experiences and perceptions that emerged from their stories. This chapter presents their narratives.

A primary duty of the narrative interviewer is to listen intently to each narrative and then render them with high-fidelity (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000, p. 72). A quality indicator of a narrative interview is a high-fidelity rendition containing as much detail and consideration as possible. The following narratives were rendered with great levels of fidelity and respect for the participants and the research process, and while they represent individual stories the following statements, directly quoted from Jovechelovitch and Bauer (2000), should be kept in mind:

- Narratives privilege the reality of the storyteller: the reality of narrative refers to what is real to the storyteller.
- Narratives do not copy the reality of the world outside themselves: they propose particular representations/interpretations of the world.
- Narratives are not open to proof, and cannot simply be judged as true or false: they express the truth of a point of view, of a specific location in space and time.
- Narratives are always embedded in the socio-historical. The particular voice in a narrative can only be understood in relation to a larger context: no narrative can
be formulated without such a system of referents.

(Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000, p. 72)

The following narrative data is organized in the subsequent manner: (a) individual participant stories, as well as background information describing each participant’s teaching experiences, the defining experiences that have influenced each participant’s teaching, their personal reflection on their approach to professional learning and growth, and their attitudes and perspective relating to educational technology; (b) emerging conceptual themes across the participants’ narratives in relation to the research question as identified through analysis of the interview transcripts; and (c) a summary of the conceptual themes. The final chapter of this study will present the results of this study viewed through the lens of the conceptual framework and in relation to the literature review. It will also address implications for practice, the potential for future related studies and next steps.

Participants’ Stories

Beau’s Story: “It Goes Back to My Fear of Getting Too Deep with Technology”

The end of the 2015-2016 school year marked the conclusion of Beau’s first year teaching high school. Prior to making the transition to teaching high school students, the 43-year-old taught 5th and 6th grade students for fifteen years. In addition to teaching freshman, Beau coaches freshmen boys’ basketball and is married to an elementary principal. I interviewed Beau at the end of May 2016, after the school year had concluded and he was already at school for summer basketball work-outs.

Prior to the start of the interview Beau’s demeanor was subdued. Beau shared concern that his lack of high school teaching experience would hinder his ability to provide a strong and valuable interview for my study. I shared more detailed information about the purpose and the
narrative approach of the study until Beau stated that his fears were allayed and he was prepared to begin the interview process. Here is Beau’s story.

Early in his career, Beau didn’t feel it necessary to spend his own personal time on professional development. As a young upper elementary teacher, Beau’s only method of growing professionally was to attend district and building required professional development, he shared:

I never thought that I knew it all, but I would always think that I didn’t need to do much outside of the classroom. Now that I’m a veteran teacher, I look back and know that I was only committing to the bare minimum and growing very little as a teacher.

Beau expressed that as he gained teaching experience he became more engaged in his profession. Now an avid reader of professional books and articles, Beau searches for texts that will help him motivate his students and better meet their learning needs. Beau’s wife is a building-level administrator, and together they spend a portion of their personal time attending cutting-edge education conferences focused on instructional best practice and student motivation. However, despite Beau’s focus on professional growth, he described himself as “technology challenged” and candidly shared his fear of getting in too deep with technology without possessing the proper skills to prevent major technology mishaps:

I would generally say that I have a fear of getting in too deep as far as technology is concerned. I always worry that I would not know: (a) where to go, (b) how to get out of it, or (c) that I would hit a wrong button and lose something important.

It’s this fear Beau describes that is a source of regret when he reflected on his early years in education. Looking down at his lap, Beau quietly revealed, “I think that’s limited what I have been able to do as an educator.” Finding himself falling behind some of his younger colleagues,
twelve years into his career Beau made a conscious decision to take advantage of professional
development related to technology. In addition to organized professional development
opportunities, Beau reached out for assistance from “more hip grooved up teachers” as well as
his students, in order to address his steep technology learning curve.

When asked about the positive and negative aspects of his department’s use of Google
Apps to support collaboration, Beau began by explaining that Google Apps provided his
department a starting point for expanding to a blended collaborative practice. When recalling the
initial stages of the department’s online collaboration, Beau shared the following thoughts:

When it was first introduced there was a lot of, ‘Oh Yeah!’ excitement, camaraderie and
cheering that ‘This is a great start!’ but as soon as I think you get back to your classroom
and your students, life takes on and you don’t forget that it’s there, but you don’t
necessarily have the same sort of excitement for it.

Subsequently, Beau revealed his perception that the department’s struggle with implementation
of online collaboration had less to do with technology and more to do with their weak face-to-
face collaboration practices. “Well, we were not well-oiled and we were not a well-oiled
machine,” he disclosed, an opinion which provided a deeper glimpse into the workings of his
department as a team, a group of people with a common goal with a collaboration break-down
occurring due to a lack of direction. “We didn’t have a clear-cut direction from the start to the
finish. It was more of the wandering Sunday drive kind of look, and it definitely wasn’t the
highway to get us where we needed to go.”

**Hilary’s Story: “I’m Not Just Going to Go Through the Motions. It’s Meeting the Goal at
the End of the Day.”**

Hilary was a young college instructor at a major university in the Southwest before
returning to her hometown to teach high school for the 2015-2016 school year. At the college level, Hilary primarily taught freshman and sophomore level courses, as well as upper-level coursework for students whose primary language was not English. In her high school teaching position, Hilary currently teaches junior and senior level dual credit courses and Advanced Placement courses. I interviewed Hilary in May 2016 at a local coffee shop after we both had worked a long morning of summer school. A terrible thunderstorm was raging outside but as soon as we settled in Hilary was focused and ready to begin.

When asked about the positive and negative aspects of using Google Apps to support collaboration, Hilary’s comfort level with technology stood in stark contrast to Beau’s. Speaking enthusiastically, she described her familiarity with several online collaborative platforms, “I’ve worked with lots of different online sites, things like Canvas, and Blackboard, Moodle, and this year was my first year using Google Classroom.” She continued by explaining that there was very little learning curve to tackle with Google Classroom due to its integration with other, more familiar Google Apps, namely Google Drive, Google Docs, Google Sheets and Google Forms. The only frustration with technology that Hilary expressed during the interview surrounded the department’s experimentation with a Google Add-on named Flubaroo. She recalled a time early in the fall when the entire department created common assessments on Google Forms with the intention of using the Flubaroo add-on to grade the assessments:

We used Google Forms, and then we tried to use an add-on to grade the common assessment for us. Our intent was to collect information that helped us understand how our students knew what the answers were, and why they didn’t, because that was what was going to really inform our teaching. Unfortunately, we didn’t know enough about Flubaroo and it created this weird chart…some of the answers were graded correctly and
some of the answers weren’t…it was just kind of…it was odd.

Shaking her head, she went on to say that the department eventually worked through the glitches and in the end the technological issues “weren’t that big of a deal.”

Hilary’s comfort level and ease with technology didn’t translate to her comfort level with the high school’s collaboration practices. Her understanding of collaboration emanated from her previous collaboration experiences. All of those experiences were at the college level and in describing them she recalled that at the college level, “…a lot of people collaborate with each other, but they do it in sporadic ways. The collaboration that’d always happen was much more fluid, or e-mail based, or idea based, not so much practicality.” She revealed that she was taken aback when she learned that collaboration in her high school position would look drastically different. In describing her reaction, she was wide-eyed and stammered:

This year, being in the department, and being told at the beginning of the year that we were…that we had time set aside for it (collaboration), that was insane to me, but never…it’s cool, don’t get me wrong, I had just…I had never had time set aside for something like that. At the college level, it was always a figure it out on your own sort of thing and collaborate when you need help.

Although her department had regularly scheduled time for collaboration, Hilary sensed that their approach lacked effectiveness. She described it as, “how can we do this as smooth as possible, and get it done on time.” She then back-tracked a bit to clarify her perspective and continued:

Those are important tasks, don’t get me wrong. But they weren’t the tasks that necessarily focused our collaboration on why we were doing what we were doing, the way we were doing it, and whether it was working. It was more about getting the task done.” The frustration in her message was easily discernable when she shared that their
scheduled collaboration was much more of a meeting than it was collaboration.

**Bev’s Story: “Without Collaboration You End Up With Tunnel Vision”**

Bev began her teaching career much later than most people who enter the profession; nevertheless, Bev was named the school district’s Teacher of the Year after only her sixth year in the classroom. In addition to teaching, Bev shared that she is a single mom who coaches two varsity sports and works a couple of paper routes before her school day begins.

Much like Beau, Bev would spend much of her summer mornings at school conducting volleyball workouts. However, we were able to meet for an interview one afternoon in early June 2016. In the beginning of the interview, Bev thoughtfully described herself as a “teacher in training,” and referred to this description several different times throughout the interview process. When asked to elaborate, she paused for a moment then replied, “I always feel like I’m that teacher that…It’s like I’ve learned a lot of things, but I know that I still have to keep learning new things in order to become an even better teacher.” Bev revealed that she strives hard to remain student focused; so, it was no surprise that when asked about how she approaches her own professional growth, she discussed in detail how colleagues and mentors have helped her best meet students’ needs:

I’ll be perfectly honest, I’ve had some great mentors. When you’re young and think you know everything but then a mentor comes in to observe you and says, ‘Nope’ it’s a serious wake-up call. I have had a lot of mentors and they have helped me think differently, to help me understand that it’s not okay to only reach some of my kids; I have to reach all of them to make them successful.

In recalling her lived experiences with departmental collaboration, Bev, who stated that she collaborates with multiple communities of educators, shared one of her first learning experiences
resulting from collaboration and provides a strong example of the importance of teacher agency:

I had my wake-up call to collaboration not long after I started teaching. As a department, we decided to record ourselves teaching. We each recorded a lesson, watched the videos together as a department. That was ugly, absolutely ugly. We decided to record another lesson, but collaborated on key things beforehand, like lesson design. Then we watched the second videos together and gave each other feedback. I didn’t understand at the time, but that was the most powerful professional development I’ve ever had.

While voicing her thoughts on the positive and negative aspects of using Google Apps to support collaboration, Bev honed in on how Google Apps for Education provided the entire department with a transparent platform to collect, organize and view common assessment data. Unlike Beau and Hilary, Bev doesn’t view the department’s use of Google Apps as an addition to face-to-face collaboration; rather, she sees the use of Google Apps as a springboard for richer and more reflective collaboration. She explained rapidly and with excitement:

I’m so competitive, that when I would open our department’s Google Classroom and see my colleague’s names and all of their students’ common assessment data, I would think ‘Oh, I need to step it up! Let me go see what so-and-so is doing in their classroom. What did they do to get their kids’ scores to jump so much?’"

Elaborating further, Bev slowed down and explained that the department’s use of Google Classroom to house common assessment data permits her to view not only her own students’ data, but also that of all other students taking that same course within the department. In Bev’s mind, the transparency of the data should be a springboard for a richer collaboration process, and she shared an example, “If I thought my students’ data was negative when I compared them to everyone else’s data I would tell myself, ‘Okay, if their students can do it, then my students can
do it. What should my next step be?” She continued talking through her thought process explaining that the common assessment data she viewed on the Google Classroom should drive her to “work collaboratively with her team,” and tweak her instructional practice to obtain stronger student results. When relaying what she perceived as a negative aspect of utilizing a blended collaborative environment, Bev simply stated, “…the technology can be limiting if you let it be limiting. I really think you can get out of it what you want to get out of it if you are willing to put in the work.”

**Lilian’s Story: “The Department Itself Did Not Adhere to what It Needed to Adhere To. It Fell Apart.”**

Lilian was the last participant interviewed for this research project. She is a National Board Certified Teacher who has been in the education field for over 20 years. Lilian has extensive experience teaching at the middle school, high school, and college levels, as well as working as a secondary instructional coach and a media specialist. Lilian frequently facilitates professional development in the areas of technology and instruction, and is regularly assigned to be a new teacher mentor. In addition, Lilian was one of the department coaches assigned to each department in the intervention framework used as an effort to improve future scores on the national standardized assessment.

As stated earlier, Lilian is a frequent presenter of professional development and seeks out opportunities for her own professional growth. In telling her story, Lilian disclosed that although she has been in the field of education for over twenty years, she works hard to stay on the cutting edge where technology is concerned and strives to make herself an expert on new platforms and applications that have the potential to benefit student learning. Lilian considers herself a mentor to all and she revealed that teachers with questions, concerns, and even lagging confidence find
their way to her where she provides varied instructional and technological support, guides teachers through reflection and even gives hugs when needed. Lilian also reported that when necessary, she can be extremely direct in her communication style and will let staff members know when she feels they are not doing what’s best for students or the school in general.

When asked about the positive and negative aspects of using Google Apps to support collaboration Lilian immediately jumped to the negative stating emphatically, “The negative occurs when teachers use technology in their own silo and not in collaboration, because in their silos they can enter whatever data they want.” Lilian’s tone and facial expression clearly communicated the aversion she felt toward the department’s collaborative approach. When prodded further, she pronounced that data could easily be “fudged” by tired teachers who are more willing to “make things up” simply because it is “easier”. While Lilian acknowledged that Google Apps provides an easily accessible and transparent vehicle for collaboration, in her opinion all aspects of collaboration need to occur with members “in the same room”. In her view, the only legitimate approach to collaboration occurs in a face-to-face environment and is tightly structured using a collaborative protocol.

Lilian’s initial comments regarding technology and collaboration were perplexing and left many questions. In a follow-up interview with Lilian, she shared that her prior experiences as a teacher and instructional coach combined with observations made throughout the school year made her question the professional integrity of two department members, both of whom chose not to participate in this study. Lilian stated that her mistrust in the two teachers stems from inconsistencies regarding their fidelity in implementation of the department’s assessment intervention plan and the subsequent data they collected. In our follow-up interview, Lilian stated that the teachers in question spoke very freely about their disregard for the department’s
assessment intervention plan and the “fudging” of their student data. Lilian elaborated by stating that the teachers “aren’t dumb and they understand that no one will hold them accountable to the original student data that should result in the spreadsheet used for collaborative purposes.” This experience, combined with collegial observations drawing attention to a lack of evidence in implementation, and Lilian’s previous experience and training as an instructional coach is what led to her opinions regarding online collaboration. Lilian concluded the follow-up interview by saying that she would be open to a model of online or blended collaboration that “goes beyond numbers and includes the true examination of student work.”

**Conceptual Themes Across Narratives**

This narrative inquiry explored the lived experiences of four educators transitioning their mode of collaboration from face-to-face to a blended model. The participants’ stories provided thick narrative data revealing four conceptual themes outlined in the table below. These themes emerged through use of Clandinin and Connelly’s (1990) three-part methodology for analysis of narrative inquiry which includes broadening, burrowing and restorying. Interview transcripts and field texts were analyzed for evidence of storied patterns within the narrative data. The identified storied patterns were color coded and further analyzed until four conceptual themes emerged.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrative Data Supporting the Conceptual Themes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Trust</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Beau</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
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<tr>
<td>Our communication wasn’t good</td>
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<td>We didn’t want to hurt anyone’s feeling</td>
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<tr>
<td>Worried about the judgement</td>
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<tr>
<td>I would’ve old school’d it</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hilary</td>
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<tr>
<td>I’ve always had technology in my classroom</td>
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<td>Professional learners who are also friends</td>
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<td>They want to be left alone</td>
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<td>We would reevaluate where we were and adjust</td>
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<tr>
<td>We would share it and access it</td>
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<tr>
<td>She knew what I wanted to get out of it</td>
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<tr>
<td>The collaboration we had in pairs wasn’t the same</td>
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<tr>
<td>As a department we had trouble bonding</td>
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<tr>
<td>There was a separation in the department</td>
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<tr>
<td>I could pick up her stuff and know what she wanted to say</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
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<tr>
<td>You want to make sure you aren’t overstepping</td>
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<td>Bev</td>
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**Trust.** All four participants reacted strongly when asked about the similarities and differences between collaborating and learning together face-to-face versus collaborating and learning together online. As the participants shared their stories, three variable viewpoints materialized from their narratives:

- When trusting collaborative relationships exist, online collaboration becomes a natural extension of face-to-face collaboration.
- Online collaboration leads to greater risk-taking and can help facilitate trust between collaborators.
- Online collaboration is not always trustworthy.

A common belief that trust plays a key role in online collaboration resonated loudly throughout all the stories even though none of the participants addressed it directly.

Rather than sharing stories focused on collaboration with the entire department, Hilary and Bev both chose to share their collaboration experiences with their respective common course teaching partners. The two participants newest to the teaching profession, both perceived online

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trust</th>
<th>Technology Proficiency &amp; Resistance</th>
<th>Accountability</th>
<th>Department Leadership</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It’s very easy to be dishonest</td>
<td>You have to learn how to use it</td>
<td>This is too hard. I’m not going to do this</td>
<td>We lose sight of that in the department</td>
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<tr>
<td>They just start making stuff up</td>
<td>He was still doing it all by hand</td>
<td>You didn’t do all the things I told you you had to do</td>
<td>She needs to run the department the way she runs her classroom</td>
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<tr>
<td>It lacks honesty, real honesty</td>
<td></td>
<td>Hold everyone accountable</td>
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<tr>
<td>It lacks the ability to speak freely</td>
<td></td>
<td>They have to be held accountable</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>There’s no ifs, ands or buts...just like with our kids</td>
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</table>
collaboration as a natural extension of their face-to-face collaboration with their common course teaching partners. Hilary believed the success of the blended collaboration with her teaching partner was a result of their strong face-to-face collaborative practice:

The only reason it worked was because we had so many face-to-face conversations. It took time, but we reached a point, for instance, where I could get into our shared Google Drive and read her notes on a shared lesson we developed and I would know exactly what she was saying.

Although Hilary and Bev teach different courses and grade levels, Hilary’s collaboration experience with her common course teaching partner was very similar to Bev’s. According to Bev:

I had another person that I worked with and we would collaborate because we were teaching Humanities together. We decided that we needed to be on the same page at any given time so we made a plan and it was all done on Google. We kept a Google Calendar together and kept a Google slideshow with our common lessons. We even began using Google sheets to track our common assessment data together. Adding Google Apps to our collaboration made our collaboration complete.

Hilary and Bev shared a common belief that using a blended collaborative format in common course planning resulted in more powerful and productive collaboration. The common thread for both Hilary and Bev is that the collaboration practices that occur with their common course partners naturally evolved into a blended format because mutual trust led to strong face-to-face collaboration and a desire for more powerful student results. The stories told by Hilary and Bev indicate that blended collaboration within their common course teaching dyads were much more satisfying and successful than collaboration occurring with their entire department.
Comments from Beau, regarding the similarities and differences of collaborating face-to-face versus online, clearly indicated a difference in his collaborative experiences and background from the other study participants. Rather than drawing on past collaborative experiences with Google Apps, Beau drew on his experiences with successful online student collaboration and focused on the potential of the practice for teachers:

I think it could actually allow you to be a little bit more confident, a little bit bolder. I say that simply because you don’t have to see the eye contact or the body movement or feel the pressure of the room when you respond online. Collaborating online allows for more risk-taking in regard to asking questions and trying new things. Oftentimes he observed that his students did not have the confidence to openly collaborate and share with their peers; however, those same students would take advantage of an opportunity to collaborate in Google Apps because the fear of judgement was removed. He felt that the same could be true for teachers, “When you collaborate online, you don’t have to see the eye contact or body movement of the room when you respond.”

Whereas the stories of Hilary, Bev and Beau reveal that trust plays a major role in online collaboration, Lilian’s message embodied mixed emotions concerning the practice. Lilian initially voiced a fierce assumption that online collaboration results in corrupt outcomes. She expressed with visible frustration:

You need to meet all in the same room. It’s less likely that you are going to have six or seven people say ‘Let’s fudge everything’ than have two teachers go off by themselves and think, ‘I’m tired. I’m just going to make this (student data) up because I know where they fall anyhow.’”
This last comment expressed Lilian’s overriding concern about the authenticity of the outcomes of online collaboration. As we progressed through the interview, Lilian’s demeanor did soften somewhat, and while she remained steadfast to the belief that high quality collaboration can only exist in a face-to-face environment she acquiesced that technology could be a valuable tool in the collaboration process, saying, “Remember that technology is just another tool in the toolbox. We could have chart paper and markers. We could have highlighters. It’s going to fail if our collaboration environment is not intact.” All the participants, in fact, spoke to the importance of department members being committed to the collaborative process.

Technology Proficiency and Resistance. It should be expected that interviews with educators whose careers span between five and 20 plus years would show varying levels of proficiency and willingness to collaborate online. Regardless of the differences in their proficiency and comfort levels, however, the teachers’ stories reflected that their feelings surrounding their department’s online collaboration remained in a constant flux. While each participant willingly admitted that expanding departmental collaboration to include Google Apps as an online collaborative environment has strong advantages, their stories also revealed disappointment in the level of commitment and engagement by members of their department.

Illustrating this frustration, Hilary recollected an occurrence early in the school year when their department was just beginning their transition to a blended collaborative format. At the time, department collaboration was focused on the development of common student assessments that would not only be deployed to students online, but the data would be collected, accessed and analyzed collaboratively through the department’s Google Classroom. Hilary shared:

We decided to collaboratively build our common assessments in Google Forms and then
use a Google add-on called Flubaroo to grade the assessment for us. Our goal was to collect information that would help us understand how our students knew what the answers were, and why they didn’t, because that’s what was going to inform our teaching.

Hilary shared that when the department immediately struggled to get Flubaroo to meet their needs, they fell back into their old habits of face-to-face collaboration. Department members less comfortable with the shift to online collaboration, and technology in general, scheduled a meeting to “talk” about the issues. When recalling the situation Hilary’s voice clearly communicated her frustration in the direction of the meeting, “We sat and talked about Flubaroo, we talked about Google Forms, and we talked about technology, when we should have been working through the kinks together online.” The notion of “working through the kinks” of online collaboration was also not lost on Bev. She divulged that she sometimes felt overwhelmed with the department’s transition to a blended collaborative environment, particularly when it felt like they were doing “double the work” by collaborating face-to-face about their department’s process of using Google Classroom for online collaboration. Bev explained, “We built this Google Classroom so we could collaborate online and then certain people panicked,” she continued, “we actually had to schedule a face-to-face meeting to listen to someone gripe, ‘I don’t want to learn new technology. I don’t want to learn these new things.’” Lilian echoed a similar sentiment during her interview, “I found that as soon as the department realized that navigating the transition to online collaboration was going to be difficult, some of them wanted to fall right back to what they knew.”
Table 2

*Quotes from Bev and Lilian Regarding Engagement*

- In our department, I think you could get out of it (blended collaboration) what you wanted to. –Bev

- People in our department were realizing that we have this Google classroom set up for collaboration and not much was getting accomplished. –Bev

- The technology allows us to collaborate in a way we never could before. When people engage in the process, it allows us to work at school or home in different ways. –Lilian

While revelations like Hilary’s and Bev’s indicated their own willingness to “work through the kinks” of technology and engage collaboratively online, Beau’s interview implied a lower level of efficacy with technology. Beau’s feelings of incompetence with technology led to his own struggle engaging with department members online, and he confessed, “Our online collaboration wasn’t going well. Some people were only checking in on Google Classroom to say they did, while others were really trying to communicate online and figure out how to make it all work for the department.” For Beau, a low level of efficacy with the technology led to a hesitance to actively engage online with other department members. Rather than actively collaborating online, Beau found himself in the role of a lurker, a participant who observes and draws information from reading information provided by active online members (Gray, 2004; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Although lurking is considered a legitimate form of online engagement, Beau voiced a belief that his role as a lurker did not positively contribute to the department moving forward in their transition to blended collaborative practice, “I became an observer. I sat back and watched to see where I could fit, and that’s on me. I should’ve stepped up and help steer the department in the right direction” (Gray, 2004; Lave & Wenger, 1991).
The issue of teacher proficiency and willingness to engage online is a prominent finding that resonated with all four of the study’s participants. They honestly disclosed the frustrations they felt stemmed from department members’ lack of commitment and resistance to engage online in the collaboration process. While Beau self-reflected and shared frustrations with his own level of proficiency and online engagement, Hilary, Bev and Lilian focused on the perceived shortcomings of other department members’ roles in the department’s transition to a blended practice of collaboration. A profound observation made by Hilary, regarding the department’s growing pains with the transition to blended collaboration is quite telling:

There were times we were challenged with technical problems, but the basic usage of the technology wasn’t complicated or difficult. That didn’t change the fact that we had a lot of trouble getting everyone in the department to use it the way we asked them to and to engage with one another online. Our true challenges in this effort were individual teacher competence and the willingness to use the technology to collaborate.

This quote provides a fitting segue into another finding that permeates the participants’ stories: accountability is crucial to the collaboration process.

**Accountability.** While each of the four participants spoke to the frustrations that emerged because of their department’s struggle with accountability, Beau and Hilary were the most candid in sharing their stories and made numerous statements regarding the finding of accountability:
Table 3

*Quotes from Beau and Hilary Regarding Accountability*

- We need to do better to maintain it (online collaboration). We have teachers in the department who were committed to collaborating online and then teachers who barely gave it a try. -Beau

- We never want to hurt anybody’s feelings or step on anybody’s toes. The bottom line is that sometimes you can’t all be yes people. We’ve got to stand up and hold each other accountable. -Beau

- At the bare minimum, we have too many people in our department who don’t contribute what they actually know, and we have people in the department who contribute things we don’t need to know. –Hilary

- If you see people all the time, and then you are supposed to collaborate with them online, you don’t feel the need to collaborate online because you just assume that you will see them in the hallway later and tell them then. -Hilary

- If you are comfortable with a piece of technology you embrace it, and do things with it, and run with it. When you are not you kind of push it away, and try to find ways to not use it, or just lean on the, “I don’t know, I don’t want to,” thing. That caused us a lot of trouble. –Hilary

Beau’s interview included many stories focused on the need for accountability, both personal accountability and departmental accountability. As shared earlier, Beau was quite reflective and candid about his own perceived shortcomings in the department’s blended collaboration process. He was no less candid when expressing frustrations with his colleagues’ lack of personal accountability to the department and their blended collaboration practice:

As a department, our communication wasn’t good, it was last minute, and then you could count on certain people to not check their email or engage on the Google Classroom because they knew they wouldn’t get called out about it.
Beau indicated that another reason for the department’s lack of accountability was the collective attitude they exhibited as a department, “I think we all saw what was happening, we knew we weren’t collaborating effectively but no one really just stepped up. We were just all a little bit reserved and didn’t want to step on anyone’s toes.” For Beau, the absence of personal accountability by department members led to a lack of professional responsibility by the department. He explained, “As a team of teachers, we have the responsibility to make the commitment to improve and get better at teaching kids.” Beau continued by voicing optimism for the department’s blended collaboration in the upcoming school year:

   We can look at this first year like blended collaboration was new and it was a starting point. This next year we need to hold each other accountable. We need to trust one another and decide the best way to implement it with consistency as a department.”

Hilary echoed sentiments similar to Beau’s. As Hilary shared her story, she revealed her reflections from a meeting that took place prior to the start of the school year, when the department was planning their strategy for integrating online collaboration into their existing collaborative practice. Her account of the situation not only exposed a desire for autonomy, but also highlighted the mixed emotions and the unintended consequences of a team lacking in accountability and teacher agency:

   When we were talking about how we would collaborate online the student in me was thinking, ‘This is so stupid.’ It was the beginning of the year, and teachers can’t help but be fussy like our teenagers are. As the year, has gone on and I’ve gotten to know more people in the building, it’s occurred to me that some of the best people for me to learn from aren’t necessarily in my department. It’s not because my department members aren’t knowledgeable, it’s because what I need I’m not necessarily getting from them.
Not only did Hilary share several anecdotes exposing her frustration with the department’s lack of accountability and individual teacher agency, but her stories also revealed a desire to collaborate outside the confines of departmental hierarchy and boundaries. This desire aligns with the philosophy of how successful communities of practice develop, rather than the scheduled practice of departmental collaboration.

Participants Bev and Lilian, who present the longest tenure at the study site, shared anecdotes indicating a common perspective in viewing their department’s struggle with accountability. Throughout their interviews, both shared insights indicating that department members’ struggles with accountability reached beyond the blended collaborative practice and into professional integrity. The general feeling of Bev and Lilian was that there were members of their department providing “lip service” to the department’s initiatives without any true intent of follow-through on their part. In Lilian’s account, she implied that some members of the department entered the teaching profession without a clear understanding of the necessary commitment:

We’ve gotten into this profession because we love the subject, we love the kids, we want to help, but we tend to fall back into, ‘Well, this is too hard. I’m not going to do this.’

We become the students that we hate in our classrooms.

Bev also shared a revealing insight, “There are some people (in the department) that really believe…I wouldn’t say they think they know everything, but they think that way they were taught is the only way.” A remark made by Hilary gave credence to Bev’s insight. Early in Hilary’s interview, she shared that the site’s low scores on the national standardized assessment, led to an early agreement by all department members to develop a common plan to address a common learning standard. However, later comments made by Hilary suggested that she made
an alternate plan of focus with her common course teaching partner, “We spent a lot of time focused on [different content] because we had juniors and seniors. So, we integrated [the identified common learning standard], but they were really just a supporting point for us.” This last comment pointed to the participants’ prevailing concern about their department’s leadership. Each of the participants spoke to the importance of solid leadership as an element of effective blended collaboration.

**Department Leadership.** When face-to-face departmental collaboration was a new practice in the participants’ district, building administrators used a heavy hand in the implementation and accountability to the district’s vision of collaborative best practice. For years, this top-down approach resulted in an intense teacher focus on data collection and form completion, with little effort placed toward using the data to inform instructional change and practice. Political turmoil and frequent changes in central office administration have since dissolved the district’s top-down approach, and currently, most of the information and practices relating to collaboration are conveyed from the school district’s longstanding teachers to those teachers new to the district. The participants’ stories imply a need for strong leadership within the department, and specifically a strong department chair, therefore providing numerous revealing remarks in regards to their department’s leadership:
Table 4

Quotes Regarding Department Leadership

- Maybe the blended collaboration would work better if administration stepped in and said, “Department chairs, this is what you are going to do this year.” - Bev

- I think building administration would be able to enforce the blended collaboration whereas I don’t think our department chair would be able to. – Bev

- It has to do with having a strong leader with a vision for leading effective collaborative practice with a vision. – Bev

- The department chair did not hold the teachers to what they needed to be held to. It (blended collaboration) fell apart. – Lilian

- They’re all awesome people, but they’re coming in from their own experiences, and they were never formally taught the how’s and why’s of collaboration. – Lilian

- I told her (the department chair) this; that she needs to run the department the way that she would run her classroom. – Lilian

- We have a Google classroom just like our students. There shouldn’t be any step-down when it comes to us and communication, just like we expect it (communication on Google classroom) from our students our department chair should be expecting the same from us. – Beau

- The natural collaboration we had in pairs and groups (within the department) was much more beneficial that our collaboration as an entire department. – Hilary

The stories shared by the participants revealed strong feelings of disappointment and dissatisfaction regarding the role and performance of their department chair. The teachers all described their department chair in positive terms like “sweet” and “kind” but then expressed deep frustration with the department chair’s inability to lead the department in any method of productive collaboration. Hilary’s individual stance on the topic of department leadership was brief, but informative, “This year we had a very passive department chair, who is one of the sweetest women I know, but a grounded foundation in our collaboration was missing.” As the
youngest and least experienced teacher participant in the study, Hilary was guarded in expressing her dissatisfaction in the leadership of the department chair and throughout the interview she tip-toed around the topic. However, the thoughts she did express fell in line with those of the more experienced participants who strongly suggested that their blended collaborative practice would been much more effective if the department chair had led with a firmer hand and had held department members accountable to the process of both face-to-face and online collaboration.

Beau and Lilian, the two participants with the most teaching experience, were the most forthright in sharing their frustrations regarding their department chair’s lack of leadership. Beau compared the role of department chair to that of a head athletic coach, particularly where communication is concerned:

I think the department chair has the same responsibility as a head coach as far as communication is concerned. We have to be in contact. For a coaching staff and team to stay in contact there is constant back and forth conversation through group email and our team website. It is no different for the department chair; part of their job is to keep communication open and flowing, like setting up the Google Classroom in the same way we set it up for our students. This way we would all get dings on our phone telling us, ‘Hey something was added, check into this.’ They (the department chair) could post something like ‘I just quickly need you to respond to this’ and then we could respond on our phone – from anywhere – just like our students do.

Beau’s story expressed frustration with the leadership of their department chair, however he still maintained a positive outlook regarding the future of the department’s collaborative practice. Throughout the interview process, he remained grounded in the belief that the initial year of the department’s blended collaboration should be viewed as a starting point, and with the future
addition of stronger departmental leadership and better communication he anticipated collaborative growth and improvement as the department moves forward.

Remarks made by Lilian indicate an anger at the loss of the department’s collaborative opportunities to inform instruction:

The department didn’t see improvement quick enough, or some of them didn’t see the results they wanted, and so they didn’t understand the potential capacity for blended collaboration and as a result the initiative was no longer a priority for some of them.

Lilian’s eyes narrowed and she straightened her back as she bluntly described her opinion regarding a role she strongly believes the department chair should play in any collaboration process:

We had a fairly weak leader who wouldn’t push buttons, and that doesn’t work. You have to have a really, really strong department chair who will, forgive my words, put on their [expletive] wings, be the teacher to the teachers, and hold everyone accountable.

Differing from the stories of the other three participants, Bev refrained from specifically referring to departmental leadership in her narrative, but her story reflected a spectrum of emotions and suggests a lack of departmental leadership. One of the most telling comments Bev made regarding leadership speaks loudly to her competitive nature, but also indicates that she views her department as an island, “Oh my gosh, it always seems like we are behind the other departments (regarding collaboration practices). By the time our department starts to get it together, the other departments are already operating at their best.” As Bev processed through this line of thought she began to speak more rapidly and questioned this researcher about the collaborative practices of a different department at the research site. She inquired whether the department’s collaboration mirrored the “collaborative chaos” of her department. When this
researcher responded that the other department’s collaboration was efficient and effective, Bev replied, almost to herself, “sometimes it would be nice to have an iron fist in a velvet glove.”

The issue of department leadership garnered the most emphatic responses from the study’s participants. All four participants were steadfast in their belief that for effective implementation of any form of collaboration to occur strong and consistent departmental leadership must be in place. However, their interviews instead indicate a desire for department management or coordination, rather than leadership. When talking about their department leader, the participants spoke of the need for the person in this position to have “an iron fist”, to “hold(ing) everyone accountable”, and someone to provide department members ongoing reminders of items to be completed. The participants’ perceptions of the leadership qualities required for a successfully collaborating community stands in stark contrast to what Wenger describes as the type of leadership necessary for effective communities of practice, “The role of ‘community coordinator’ who takes care of the day-to-day work is crucial, but a community needs multiple forms of leadership: thought leaders, networkers, people who document the practice, pioneers, etc.” (Wenger, 2000, p. 231).

Concluding Thoughts

Exploring the stories of educators transitioning their mode of collaboration from face-to-face to a blended model provided rich insight into the challenges of professional collaboration and the conditions required for the transition to a blended model of collaboration. In a research area where a significant gap in the current literature exists, the thick narrative data resulting from in-depth interviews and field notes, revealed several themes providing further insight into the collaborative workings of the four participants.

There were four conceptual themes that emerged through the participants’ stories: trust,
technology proficiency and resistance, accountability, and departmental leadership. Although the themes were previously discussed separately, they in fact have many points of intersection. One such example provides evidence of how the theme of trust intersects with the theme of technology and proficiency. Beau was extremely candid when sharing his lack of confidence and low level of efficacy with technology, revealing that his struggle with technology held him back from engaging collaboratively with other department members. However, the stories of the remaining three participants showed that their interpretation of Beau’s hesitancy to engage online as a lack of commitment and an unwillingness to participate in their collaborative process. Beau’s low efficacy with technology was a trigger that revealed deep seeded issues of trust throughout the department. He never revealed his lack of proficiency with technology to the other department members, nor did they interpret his lack of engagement as anything other than resistance. If the participants’ department was a trusting community, it would be fair to say that issues with technology proficiency and teacher resistance would be less evident.

The narrative data also provides evidence of where the themes of department leadership and accountability intersect. Each of the participants frequently spoke about their desire for department leadership to increase accountability for members of the department. The participants’ stories revealed their common perception that weak departmental leadership resulted in little top-down accountability, resulting in a less than successful transition to blended collaboration by the department. In contrast, the narrative data does not provide evidence that the participants ever embraced the potential of their own teacher agency regarding their departmental collaborative practice.

While two examples of the intersection of themes has been provided, the stories of the participants reveal countless points of intersections of the themes. Analysis of the points of
intersection of the conceptual themes are where the results of this study emerged. The following results of this study shed light on the conditions necessary to successful a transition from face-to-face collaboration to a blended model of collaborative practice:

- The narrative data pointed to the importance of trust as a condition in the development of a community of practice, and the participants’ stories revealed the presence of trusting relationships was lacking within their department.

- Teacher proficiency and self-efficacy in the use of technology is significant in a successful transition to blended collaboration, and as the narrative data illustrates, without it feelings of self-doubt may manifest as a hesitancy to engage online.

- The participants’ stories revealed that conflict between accountability and teacher agency has the potential to interfere in a successful transition to a blended model of collaborative practice.

- The participants’ voices indicate the necessary role leaders play in fostering successful collaborative practice within an organization; and when absent may result in a lack of vision and direction.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter shared the narratives of four secondary educators introduced under the pseudonyms: Beau, Hilary, Bev, and Lilian. The purpose of this narrative study was to gather the stories and examine the experiences of these four participants as they expanded their common collaborative work to include an online environment. Interviews were conducted using the elicitation technique developed by Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2000), and Clandinin and Connelly’s (1990) three-part methodology for analysis of narrative inquiry was then utilized to make sense of the participants’ lived experiences. This method of narrative analysis of narrative
inquiry includes broadening, burrowing and restorying, which provided a deep understanding of
the four conceptual themes that emerged throughout the analysis process. The participants’
narratives indicate that although they have vastly different backgrounds and teaching
experiences, the lived experiences and perceptions surrounding their blended collaboration
experiences are quite similar. Chapter five will discuss the results viewed through the lens of the
conceptual framework and in relation to the literature review. It will also address considerations
for practice, the potential for future related studies, and next steps.
Chapter 5: Results

While exploring the experience of four Midwestern high school educators as they worked to collaborate from face-to-face to a blended model of collaboration using Google Apps, this research study concerned itself specifically with ways teachers can use collaboration to address pressing issues of instructional practice needed to address student success. Evidence supporting the need for this research to address the problem of practice of ways to foster collaboration was presented in Chapter one, and reflects the climate in U.S. public secondary school educational needs. The educators’ experiences, as derived from their narratives, reflect themes of trust, technology competence, accountability and leadership. The participants’ stories provided insight into what influenced their perceptions and the decisions their department made throughout their transition to a blended collaborative practice. Their lived experience has been presented here through the participants’ eyes, and through this process of discovery has created new knowledge and understandings. The entire process emphasized the empowering of the participants to share their stories in their own voices. The goal of presenting the results is not to establish causal links but to “identify the complex interactions of factors in any given situation (Creswell, 2007, p. 39).

As discussed at the conclusion of Chapter four, the results of the study demonstrate that participants’ departmental collaborative practice never exhibited the characteristics of a community of practice which resulted in low levels of engagement in the transition to a blended model of collaborative practice. Further evidence showed that organically occurring collaborative dyads existing with some department members did display the characteristics of a successful community of practice.

Analysis of the narrative data and field texts revealed the four conceptual themes of trust, technology proficiency and resistance, accountability, and department leadership. Further
analysis of the conceptual themes and their points of intersection facilitated the development of four considerations for collaborative practice for teachers, supports for technology proficiency, resolving the conflict between accountability and agency, and conditions necessary for a culture of systemic learning in a public high school.

This chapter is organized in the following sections: review of methodology, summary of the results, discussion of the results as related to the literature review; discussion of the results viewed through the lens of the conceptual framework, discussion of limitations; discussion of considerations for practice and for future research; and concluding thoughts.

**Review of Methodology**

This narrative inquiry explored the lived experiences of educators in a Midwest urban high school, as they transitioned their mode of collaborative practice. The participants were selected through convenience sampling which provided and in-depth study of the lived experiences of the participants (Biklen & Casells, 2007). Prior to this research, the participants participated in face-to-face collaboration, however, the introduction of a statewide implementation of a national standardized assessment provided the impetus for their department to expand to a blended model of collaboration. Interview questions were developed using the lens of Wenger’s (2004) community of practice framework as a guide, and the participants’ stories were gathered through field notes and open-ended interviews employing the elicitation technique developed by Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2000). The elicitation technique was selected because it produces a more inherent and complete perspective of the participants’ experiences. Clandinin and Connelly’s (1990) three-part methodology for analysis of narrative inquiry was then utilized to make sense of the participants’ lived experiences as they transitioned their face-to-face collaboration practices to a blended model. Although narrative interviews were the
primary data source for this study, triangulation occurred through cross-checking with this researcher’s own field notes. Field notes were maintained in order to document the participants’ physical or emotional responses in addition to the interview transcripts. Additionally, member-checking occurred throughout the restorying process of the data analysis phase where the researcher collaborated with the participants to ensure their perspectives were clear and accurate to the reader. The thematic analysis of the data informed the development of statements that explain the key elements of the participants’ experience moving toward a model of blended collaboration.

**Summary of the Results**

The four participants of this narrative inquiry shared their lived experiences as they transitioned to a blended collaborative practice. At the time of the interviews, the participants had just completed an academic school year during which time the departments at their Midwestern high school had embarked on a year-long collaboration to improve student learning based on poor test scores on a national assessment. The blended collaboration model using Google Apps was launched at the start of the academic school year as teachers across the school participated in department-based collaborations.

Through analysis of the data of this narrative inquiry, results related to the research question, conceptual framework, literature review, as well as the identified conceptual themes were revealed. While many studies have been previously conducted on the topic of teacher collaboration, much of the existing research has focused on either traditional, face-to-face collaboration within a community of practice, or online collaboration occurring within an online community of practice (Hew & Hara, 2006). This study addresses a gap in the literature by examining collaboration occurring both face-to-face and online. Understanding the lived
experiences of educators as they navigate the transition to a blended collaborative practice can contribute to a stronger realization of how professional learning and growth can occur in blended collaborative environments, and how collaborative practice by educators can help contribute to addressing problems of practice and to student success.

The following results have been drawn from the analysis of the data resulting from this narrative inquiry:

- The narrative data pointed to the importance of trust as a condition in the development of a community of practice, and the participants’ stories revealed the presence of trusting relationships was lacking within their department.
- Teacher proficiency and self-efficacy in the use of technology is significant in a successful transition to blended collaboration, and as the narrative data illustrates, without it feelings of self-doubt may manifest as a hesitancy to engage online.
- The participants’ stories revealed that conflict between accountability and teacher agency has the potential to interfere in a successful transition to a blended model of collaborative practice.
- The participants’ voices indicate the necessary role leaders play in fostering successful collaborative practice within an organization; and when absent may result in a lack of vision and direction.

The following sections discuss the results and considers their relationship to the existing literature, as well as their relationship to the conceptual framework chosen as a lens for this research.
Discussion of the Results as Related to the Literature

The literature review presented in Chapter two provided context to this study by exploring and evaluating current literature in the areas of teacher professional development, communities of practice, collegial interaction and collaboration and learning, teacher resistance to technology and Google Apps for Education. Analysis of the reviewed literature led to three primary conclusions regarding the current state of knowledge:

- Teacher collaboration is the common thread to the use of communities of practice to address issues in education, professional growth in teachers and increases in academic achievement by students;
- As the demands on public school teachers increase, face-to-face collaboration will cease to meet teacher needs; and
- Online collaboration can leverage a tool such as Google Apps for Education as a cloud-based platform for online teacher collaboration.

Consideration of the findings revealed considerable gaps in the literature regarding blended collaborative practice by educators and considerations for schools transitioning their face-to-face collaborative practice to a blended model.

Trust is an Important Condition in the Development of a Community of Practice.

The results of this research study reveal the importance of trust as a condition for adult learning and for professional collaboration to evolve into a community of practice. The stories told by the participants of this study illuminated the importance of trust in adult learning and professional collaboration, and shed light on the necessity of the condition of trust for a community of practice to function.

Wenger’s (1998) work in the development of the community of practice conceptual
The framework identifies three concepts which cohere successful communities of practice: 1) mutual engagement; 2) joint enterprise; and 3) shared repertoire (p. 74). Although Wenger does not explicitly refer to trust, it is implicit in all three of the above concepts. Trust is inherent throughout the community of practice conceptual framework and is what binds “groups of people who share a passion for something that they know how to do, and who interact regularly in order to do it better” (Wenger, 2004, p.2).

Wenger’s (2004) concept of mutual engagement is evident in the research of Brouwer et al. (2012) which also supports the results relating to trust in this narrative inquiry. In “Community Development in the School Workplace,” the authors discuss mutual engagement as a way members of a collaborative team are bound together, and identify four indicators of mutual engagement:

- Identification: the extent to which members identify with the group;
- Multi-perspective contribution: the degree to which there is room for multiple perspectives in contributions to the group;
- Mutual trust and responsibility: the degree of security of the community in telling the truth; the degree to which the group members feel socially responsible for the group and individual members; and
- Social ties: the strength of the social bond that group members share (Brouwer et al., 2012, p. 405)

The two participants newest to the teaching profession, Hilary and Bev, both practiced effective blended collaboration with their common course teaching partners, and their stories provide solid examples regarding mutual engagement and communities of practice. Both Hilary and Bev shared a common belief that the effective blended collaboration they practiced in their
common course dyads naturally evolved from a mutual trust with their collaborative partners in addition to a common desire for more powerful collaborative results. Collaboration with their common course teaching partners provided a natural opportunity for mutual engagement. With their common course teaching partners, Bev and Hilary collaborated through joint enterprise and developed a shared repertoire for their collaborative work. In the case of this study, the collaboration occurred within common course dyads had a very different dynamic than the collaboration with the entire department, and it is interesting to note, that throughout the interview process neither Hilary or Bev shared a connection between the successful, blended collaborative practice that occurred with their common course partners, to the collaboration that occurred within the entire department. This finding suggests that the dyads in which Hilary and Bev collaborated were indeed functioning like communities of practice in an informal manner, whereas the collaboration that occurred with the entire department did not. Research by Wenger (1991) supports the relevance of the informal network. He states “We are so accustomed to thinking in formal terms about organizational structures that we overlook the pervasiveness of the informal in our lives. Yet...we function to a large degree in our informal networks” (p.7). Using Wenger’s concept as a lens, the department collaborating as a whole, existed as a formal organizational structure and did not naturally evolve, whereas the collaboration that occurred in dyads were informal networks, borne of trust and exhibiting the characteristics of successful communities of practice.

Two of this study’s participants—Beau and Lilian—shared viewpoints that not only differed from Hilary’s and Bev’s, but greatly differed from one another’s. Beau’s perspective reminded this researcher of the adage “out of sight, out of mind,” due to his strong belief that online collaboration leads to greater risk-taking. He drew on his students’ experiences, noting
that students lacking confidence when collaborating face-to-face were more trusting and willing to collaborate online because the fear of judgement was removed from the process. This stands in stark contrast to Lilian’s perception that trust cannot exist in an online or blended collaborative environment. There was an underlying assumption, from her perspective, that online and blended collaboration have the potential to be rife with dishonesty and result in false outcomes. Communities of practice develop through mutual engagement that occurs when mutual trust among members exists (Wenger, 2000). Therefore, the lack of trust in the department-wide collaboration demonstrated that the participants’ departmental practice was not aligned with the community of practice model or with conditions for adult learning.

**Teacher Proficiency and Self-Efficacy in the Use of Technology is Significant in a Successful Transition to Blended Collaboration; and Without it, Feelings of Self-Doubt May Manifest as a Hesitancy to Engage.**

The second result of this study is that teacher proficiency and self-efficacy in the use of technology is significant when transitioning to a blended model of collaboration. As discussed in the literature review, research on teacher resistance to technology confirms that for collaborative teams to successfully transition to a blended model of collaboration, their members should be proficient in the use of technology (Howard, 2013; Orlando, 2014). Howard’s (2013) study determined that teachers’ resistance to technology integration is often a result of “anxiety and worry about technology use” (p.358) and “having a low sense of computer-efficacy” (p.365). The work of Orlando (2014) affirms that low efficacy regarding technology creates issues that manifest in technology integration by teachers. In her narrative, Lilian revealed that she intentionally stays current on technology practices in education, providing a strong example that supports this finding. Lilian’s decision to stay current on best practice in educational technology
illustrates the concept of teacher agency. Lilian’s “active efforts” (Toom et al., 2015, p. 615) to stay current with technology made a significant difference in her ability to engage collaboratively online.

Each of the four participants in the study spoke to the power of teacher proficiency with technology as a factor for their willingness to engage online in effective blended collaboration. Driven primarily by frustration, the participants shared numerous examples of the department’s shortcomings with proficiency and engagement in their transition to a blended collaboration process. The stories of Hilary, Bev and Lilian spoke of a lack of technology proficiency by other department members and the resulting frustration that occurred. At times, they were vocal and forthright about their own competence and willingness to engage in the process, but at other times they “paid lip service” to the initiative. Beau, on the other hand, was quite self-reflective and shared personal frustrations with his own lack of proficiency with technology. Viewing the department’s struggles with technology proficiency through the lens of Orlando’s (2014) research identifies a “cultural dilemma” (p. 431) within the department. Due to his lack of technological skills, Beau perceived a loss of status within the department and the remaining study participants’ comments regarding his low engagement further cemented his perception (Orlando, 2014).

Beau’s narrative also provided a coherent example of a precept of online collaboration that was revealed through the research of Bette Gray. In 2004, Gray referred to specific members of online communities of practice as “lurkers.” As defined by Gray (2004), a lurker is a member of an online collaborative community who chooses not to “actively contribute to online discussions.” In her research, Gray contends that lurking is a “legitimate form of learning and participation” (Gray, 2004, p. 25), and idea that is closely related to Lave and Wenger’s
(1991) concept that peripheral participation is a legitimate form of becoming part of a community of practice. Beau’s low level of self-efficacy with technology led to a lack of confidence in engagement with the department’s online collaborative practice. Although he admittedly stayed active by monitoring the department’s Google Classroom, Beau did not feel he positively contributed to the department’s collaborative work, unlike the claims by both Gray (2004) and Lave and Wenger (1991) that the practices of “lurking” and peripheral participation are of some value.

Low levels of efficacy regarding technology resulted in weak of technological engagement by some members of the department, while other members proficient with technology perceived the low engagement as evidence of an unwillingness to engage in the department’s transition to blended collaboration. The lack of prior identification of the department members’ proficiency levels related to technology created a dilemma within the department and resulted in increased challenges with transitioning to a blended collaborative practice.

**Conflict Between Accountability and Teacher Agency has the Potential to Interfere in a Successful Transition to a Blended Model of Collaborative Practice.**

The third result of this research is that conflict between accountability and teacher agency has the potential to interfere in a successful transition to a blended model of collaborative practice. While Etienne Wenger’s work in communities of practice did not begin in the field of education, the body of literature addressing communities of practice in the school workplace continues to expand. The phenomena of communities of practice operating within schools was evident throughout this study as well, and relates well to the idea of accountability and teacher agency. Regardless if the participants of this study were aware of the community of practice
framework developed by Wenger (2004), their narratives indicate a tacit awareness of the commonplaces of communities of practice operating within schools. Although each participant expressed a desire for department leadership to employ firmer management of department practices, they all communicated an implicit understanding that communities of practice, and a successful transition to blended collaboration, can only occur if teacher agency is exhibited by members.

Regarding their experiences in transitioning their face-to-face collaboration to a blended collaborative practice, the participants freely shared frustrations and regrets concerning the lack of hierarchal management practices and teacher agency within the department. The overriding sense was that the attitude demonstrated by the department lacked a collective agency to the collaboration process and to one another. Through the analysis of the participants’ stories it was evident that they shared a deep investment in the success of their students. However, the conflict between their collective desire for hierarchal management and an inability to recognize the power of their own professional agency, limited the department’s ability to embrace the transition to blended collaborative practice and increases in the subsequent academic achievement of their students.

Researchers van der Heiden, Geldens, Beijaard and Popeijus (2015) use the term “teachers as change agents” when addressing teacher agency. A result of their research indicates that “teachers as change agents are aware of needing others to further develop themselves, their teaching practice, and education at the school level” (van der Heiden et al., 2015, p.695). It could be argued that participants of this study provided narrative evidence of an awareness to the necessity of their colleagues for their own professional growth and the growth of their department, however, they had created a conflict between accountability and agency that stood in
the way. Author, Christopher Sessums (2012) provides a colorful illustration of conflict between accountability and agency where technology integration is concerned, stating “The reality is that from the ground, many schools look like giant dysfunctional families whose members don’t speak to each other and pursue their own short-term agendas despite district initiatives and state standards...” (p. 183). It would be fair to say that department of this study’s participants appeared as a “giant dysfunctional family” due to a conflict between accountability and agency in their transition to a blended collaborative practice.

**Leaders Play an Essential Role in Fostering Successful Collaboration Within an Organization.**

The final result of this study is that leaders play an essential role in fostering successful collaborative practices within an organization. Research conducted by Brouwer et al. (2012) addresses the role of leadership in successful collaboration. Their study determined that teachers’ collaborative efforts have stronger outcomes when leaders play a proactive role, and their findings provide three specific areas that leaders should address:

- Leaders should “investigate what community-building efforts teacher teams already engage in”;
- Leaders should take a differentiated approach when supporting teacher teams; and
- Leaders should be “explicit and conscious” in their support of teacher teams.

(Brouwer et al., 2012, p. 416)

Unfortunately, the narrative data from this study did not provide any examples of the above attributes. Therefore, it is fair to say that although the voices of the participants repeatedly communicated a desire for a firmer department management structure, they may have found satisfaction in departmental leadership exhibiting what Brouwer et al. (2012) defines above as
effective leadership related to collaborative efforts.

The participants of this study believed that a lack of structure and accountability contributed to the participants’ low level of engagement in the department’s blended collaboration efforts. Furthermore, the reflective statements of the participants in this study indicated a lack of vision and direction in their departmental collaboration. This is consistent with the research of Szczesiul and Huizenga (2014), who studied the role in leadership in teacher collaboration at two public high school in the United States, and found that teachers are “looking for goals to give them purpose, guide their collaborative work, and mark their progress” (p. 181). This provides a foundation for understanding Lilian’s conviction that department chairs should be proficient in the knowledge and use of appropriate protocols for managing department collaboration. The reviewed literature suggests through effective guidance and the development of a collective vision and goals, department leaders have the capacity to improve departmental collaboration practices, thereby resulting in increased professional growth and student achievement (Ronfeldt et al., 2015; Szczesiul & Huizenga, 2014).

This is not to say that the literature does not support the participants’ plea for stronger departmental management. Rick DuFour and Mike Mattos (2013), former principals with over sixty year of experience, not only suggest that effective leadership support has the power to develop collaborative teams where “members share responsibility to help all students learn” (p. 38), but also state that effective leaders “are willing to confront those who fail to honor the commitments of their team” (pg. 38). The participants of this study would emphatically agree with the statements made by DuFour and Mattos (2013), although the review of current literature suggests that for effective collaboration to occur, leaders should balance a proactive role of guidance and support with a more managerial role addressing follow-through and accountability.
Discussion of the Results in Relation to the Conceptual Framework

This study was informed by the perspective of Etienne Wenger’s (2004) Community of Practice conceptual framework which serves as a lens to view how collaboration occurs among members of a community of educators. The community of practice framework served as a logical conceptual lens through which to explore and understand the lived experiences of educators as they transitioned to a blended model of collaboration. In the following sections, the results of this study will be discussed in relation to community of practice framework and the three essential characteristics of a community of practice.

Community of Practice Conceptual Framework

Etienne Wenger’s definition of community of practice is defined as “a group of people who interact and who develop relationships that enable them to address problems and share knowledge” (Wenger, 2004, p.3). His definition is grounded in the belief that adult learning and professional growth develops through social practice, which provides a coherent lens in which to view this study.

The participants’ narratives revealed that although they have vastly different backgrounds and teaching experiences, the lived experiences and perceptions surrounding their blended collaboration experiences were quite similar. Viewing the significance of the data through the communities of practice framework uncovered a fundamental weakness in the recursive flow that should occur between the three essential characteristics of a healthy community of practice: the domain, the community and the practice (Byington, 2011).
The domain. One of the primary characteristics of a community of practice is the domain. Membership within a community of practice implies that members share a commitment to a common interest that sets them apart from those outside of the community of practice (Gillespie, 2000; Wenger, 2006). The participants in this study all identified with being members of a collaborative community of educators with a shared commitment to improving the site’s scores on the national standardized assessment as they transitioned their model of collaboration from face-to-face to a blended model. Their stories revealed a collective decision to address a common learning standard determined by needs identified through analysis of the national standardized assessment data. Although the department self-initiated their transition to a blended collaborative practice, the study data indicates that their collaboration and transition processes lacked the same common commitment that surrounded the department’s approach to improving the site’s scores on the national standardized assessment. Whereas, the department had developed a common commitment to the primary focus, or content, of their collaboration, they failed to view the process of their collaboration and transition to a blended collaborative practice with a similar level of importance and commitment.

The community. A second crucial characteristic of a community of practice is the community; with the shared domain of interest as a focus, members build relationships as they share information and assist one another (Gillespie, 2000; Wenger, 2006). It can be argued that by Wenger’s definition, the study site’s department may have identified themselves as a community, but they did not exhibit the characteristics of a community of practice. As defined, communities of practice identify with the learning that occurs within their community, rather than the “unit they report to, the project they are working on, or the people they know” (Wenger et al., 2005, p.4). Descriptions of the lived experiences by the participants confirmed that at the
time of this study, the department did not exhibit the characteristics identified by Wenger as existing in a community of practice. At a foundational level, the collaboration within their community only occurred because of their affiliation with the same department.

However, it would be remiss to ignore that there were dynamics in existence within the common course dyads of the department that exhibited characteristics of healthy communities of practice. In their narratives, both Hilary and Bev shared stories about the collaboration that occurred with their common course partners. The shared knowledge that Hilary and Bev described as developing throughout the collaboration process with their respective common course partner was borne of trust are some solid examples of characteristics of communities of practice occurring within dyads.

**The practice.** The final characteristic of a community of practice is the practice itself. A model developed by Byington (2011) clarifies the idea that communities of practice develop and study an appropriate practice as defined by their common domain. This model suggests that the department’s transition to a blended collaborative practice had the potential to be their community’s identified practice; however, their inability to make any connection between the process of blended collaboration and their cooperatively identified domain caused major interference in their common work. The department members’ failure to view their transition to a blended collaborative practice as an integral process in addressing their identified domain, resulted in a fundamental weakness in the recursive flow necessary to the effectiveness of a healthy community of practice. Instead, department members were blinded by the hierarchal structure and defined political boundaries of their department which caused their practice to focus on the national standardized assessment scores, rather than their transition to a blended model of collaboration. The following table clearly illustrates the conflicts between the
characteristics of a hierarchal structure and communities of practice.

Table 5

*Characteristics of Hierarchies and Communities of Practice*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of Department Collaboration within a Hierarchy</th>
<th>Characteristics of Collaboration Occurring within a Community of Practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Administrative organization</td>
<td>Self-organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defined by hierarchy</td>
<td>Defined by open system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appointed department chair</td>
<td>Emerging leadership from within</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need for control</td>
<td>Consensus building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top-down implementation</td>
<td>Organic development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception of teacher resistance</td>
<td>Teachers own the process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment of distrust</td>
<td>Environment of trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers held accountable for outcomes</td>
<td>Teacher exhibit agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability focus</td>
<td>Learning focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extrinsic motivation</td>
<td>Intrinsic motivation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Pawlyshyn, 2013, p. 301)

**Summary**

The goal of this narrative inquiry was to understand the lived experiences and perspectives of the participants as viewed through the lens of the community of practice conceptual framework. It is reasonable to believe that numerous other communities of educators are facing similar challenges. The stories and lived experiences of this study’s participants resound with lessons to be learned about how teachers experience the transition of face-to-face collaborative work to a blended model of collaboration. However, viewing the participants’ stories through the conceptual framework uncovered the reality that while the department collaborated as a what Wenger refers to as a “functional unit” (Wenger, 1998, p. 4), they did not ever operate as a community of practice. Wenger (1998) wrote:

> A community of practice is different from a *functional unit* in that it defines itself in the
doing, as members develop among themselves their own understanding of what their practice is about...As a consequence, the boundaries of a community of practice are more flexible than those of an organizational unit. The membership involves whoever participates in and contributes to the practice (p. 4).

The hierarchal structure determined by the department’s organizational unit created barriers that stifled the potential that existed for the participants to develop into a community of practice.

**Discussion of the Results**

This study addressed the following research question: *How do four secondary educators at a Midwest, urban high school describe and make sense of their experiences with transitioning their face-to-face collaboration to a blended model that includes the use of online collaborative tools?* The study’s results indicate that a significant gap exists regarding the expected collaboration that occurs within an entire department of teachers, and the more intimate collaboration that develops between dyads of colleagues. The participants’ stories revealed that when collaboration is borne of mutual trust and a desire for professional growth, much like the collaboration described as occurring in common course dyads, professional growth is profound and members engage in greater risk taking. In the instances of collaboration occurring in common course dyads, collaborative practice naturally transitioned into a blended format so members could maximize professional growth and successful student outcomes.

The struggles faced by the department as they attempted to transition to a blended model of collaboration can be tied to the results of this study:

- The narrative data pointed to the importance of trust as a condition in the development of a community of practice, and the participants’ stories revealed the presence of trusting relationships was lacking within their department.
Teacher proficiency and self-efficacy in the use of technology is significant in a successful transition to blended collaboration, and as the narrative data illustrates, without it feelings of self-doubt may manifest as a hesitancy to engage online.

The participants’ stories revealed that conflict between accountability and teacher agency has the potential to interfere in a successful transition to a blended model of collaborative practice.

The participants’ voices indicate the necessary role leaders play in fostering successful collaborative practice within an organization; and when absent may result in a lack of vision and direction.

Unlike the collaboration that transpired within the common course teaching dyads, the department-wide collaboration, which is a district expectation, was generally stagnant and ineffective. Whereas, the transition to a blended collaborative practice evolved as a natural extension of the existing face-to-face collaboration that occurred in the common course dyads, the transition was viewed as something altogether different when collectively viewed by department members. In conclusion, this study’s results suggest that successful blended collaboration can occur in a community of practice resulting from a team of educators exhibiting mutual trust, technology proficiency, a balance of external accountability and teacher agency, and appropriate support from leaders. This was evident in the successful blended collaboration that existed in the common course dyads. The same cannot be said for the work that takes place between teachers who find themselves working together only because they teach in the same content area and have a scheduled, common collaboration time, such as the study site’s focus department.
Limitations

While this narrative inquiry resulted in thick, descriptive data and provided a voice to the lived experiences of educators transitioning their mode of collaboration to a blended model, the results were limited to the stories of four educators working together at the same urban high school in the Midwest. As a result, there are several limitations that must be noted. Given this study explored the lived experiences of only four educators, claims of generalization cannot be made. The research data included narratives from four of the eight members of the study site’s department. Participant interviews were conducted during the summer break, making it difficult to secure the remaining four department members for participation in the study. A richer, more comprehensive perspective may have resulted from participation by all eight department members.

Also, the study site was a public, urban high school in the Midwest with approximately 800 students and 65 certified staff members. As a result, results may not be generalizable within other high schools in dissimilar geographic or demographic settings, and results may also not be similar if conducted in a post-secondary, elementary, middle school or technical school environment. However, results may be transferable if the same study were to be conducted at a high school site operating under similar conditions. Additionally, data was collected from participants with varying levels and backgrounds in education and experiences with both traditional and online collaboration practices.

My role at the study site was the final limitation of this study. A challenge of this research concerned teachers as participants and a building administrator as the researcher. It is possible that the participants viewed the researcher as a superior thereby influencing their stories.
The design of this study attempted to address researcher bias and ensure trustworthiness through member-checking, triangulation and reflection on how my experiences have formed perspective on the research topic, as well as detailing my biases and positionality on the problem of practice. This study aimed to remain true to the approach of narrative inquiry where “People lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives, whereas, narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 4). The use of narrative inquiry in this study provided an intimate view of the lived experiences of educators transitioning to a blended collaborative practice.

**Considerations for Practice**

This study explored the stories of four secondary educators working at a Midwest, urban high school, as they used online collaborative tools to transition their face-to-face, departmental collaboration to a blended model of practice. The perceptions and lived experiences of the study’s participants revealed practical and viable considerations for thinking beyond face-to-face collaboration practices to a blended model of collaboration and the development of blended communities of practice. The results that emerged from the participants’ stories, as well as the literature review and the community of practice conceptual framework, led to the following considerations which may assist other educators in the establishment of effective models of blended collaboration and the promotion of blended communities of practice.

The results of this research indicate that transitioning a face-to-face collaborative practice to a blended model of collaboration may be a viable option for schools. In this study, educators transitioning their mode of collaboration met with limited success. Two of the educators participating in existing collaborative dyads, at the time of this study, found that their practice naturally transitioned to a blended model of collaboration and exhibited the characteristics of
blended communities of practice. However, attempts at transitioning the mode of collaboration within the entire department faltered. The first consideration of practice resulting from this study suggests that prior to initiating a change in large-scale collaborative practice, the identification and study of existing examples of organically occurring collaboration within the school site may be beneficial. For example, while this study set out to study collaboration occurring with an entire department of educators, two of the participants’ stories revealed organically occurring, small-scale, blended communities of practice already in existence. Prior investigation of the existing communities of practice operating in common course dyads would have indicated that effective collaboration does not require a scheduled common collaboration time for departments. Rather, it would have provided a clear example of Wenger’s (1991) research indicating that communities of practice have “an evolving form of membership, occurring naturally as the individuals engage in the practices and activities of the community” (p.5). Additionally, the investigation of communities of practice already in existence has the potential to facilitate the development of a living blueprint for initiating the transition to blended collaboration at the department level.

The narrative data also revealed that low levels of self-efficacy regarding technology use have the potential to stall the implementation of blended collaboration. Beau’s admitted fear of technology provides a real example of how low self-efficacy can influence professional practice and leads to the second implication of practice resulting from this research. The second consideration of practice resulting from this study suggests that prior to initiating a transition to a blended model of collaboration, school and department leaders would benefit from understanding the various levels of technological proficiency held by staff. This understanding would allow leaders to differentiate collaborative experiences according to individual needs, as
well as provide leaders the information necessary to deliver appropriate and easily accessible technical support to staff members. Consideration of the varying levels of staff proficiency related to technology not only affords leaders the opportunity to provide the adequate support necessary for transitioning to a blended model of collaboration, it also builds trusting relationships which are key to developing a culture of collaboration.

The third consideration suggests that school teams consider collectively identifying the vision of their collaborative work. Collectively identifying the vision of collaborative work has the potential to build staff commitment, trust and self-assurance, thereby stimulating the development of teacher agency in members of collaborative teams. This consideration also creates the potential for increased mutual engagement while providing the impetus for old collaborative practices to be pruned as new practices are implemented.

Each of the study’s participants spoke to the belief that strong departmental leadership is important in the transition to blended collaboration. This research revealed that the site’s participants were not able to successfully transition their face-to-face collaborative practice to a blended model in part, because of poor departmental leadership. This existing literature supports this outcome, as illustrated by Szczesiul and Huizenga (2014) who found that “some schools are just not ready to rely on teachers in their own teams” (p. 187). This leads to the final consideration of this study. Building leaders should consider differentiating their direction and support based on the needs of their collaborative teams. In the case of this study, the participants’ stories illustrated varying needs of support by department members. With appropriate support by school leaders, Hilary and Bev, would have been able to make connections between their successful blended collaborative practice occurring in common course dyads and the faltering transition to blended collaboration occurring within the entire
department. Beau would have greatly benefitted from leadership recognizing his low proficiency with technology and then providing the means for him to improve his technological skills and subsequent self-efficacy surrounding technology. While Lilian and the department chair needed clear direction and support related to leadership and communication.

The considerations of practice identified herein provide practical steps that can lead to the successful transition from face-to-face collaboration to a blended model of collaborative practice. By prior investigation of existing examples of organically occurring collaboration within the school site, understanding the various levels of technological proficiency held by staff, and building leaders differentiating their direction and support based on the needs of their collaborative teams, schools have a greater potential for transitioning to a model of blended collaboration. While the identified considerations are not exhaustive, they do serve as a starting point for school leadership and educators as they move towards implementing changes in their collaborative practice.

**Implications for Future Research**

This in-depth narrative inquiry was one way to explore the lived experiences of secondary educators transitioning their face-to-face collaborative practice to a blended model that includes the use of online collaborative tools. The understandings gained from the stories of the participants’ lived experiences invite future research to continue to examine teacher perceptions regarding blended collaboration, professional growth and the development of communities of practice.

The results revealed through the analysis of the participants’ stories also warrant further study. This researcher believes that if schools desire to successfully move beyond face-to-face collaboration to a blended model, future research examining the lived experiences of educators,
while they are in various stages of transitioning their collaborative practice, should be considered. Continuing research on the lived experiences of teachers in the various stages of implementing a blended collaborative model of practice may provide schools the valuable information necessary to successfully transition their collaborative practice.

Future qualitative research is also recommended in the area of school based department leadership. Analysis of the participants’ stories revealed a strong, collective voice stating that departmental leadership is a key determinant in the success or failure of transitioning to blended collaboration and development of a blended community of practice. As a result, investigating the lived experiences of departmental leadership may produce valuable information for school leaders.

This researcher chose to conduct a narrative study because the approach offered a clear voice for the participants as they transitioned their face-to-face collaboration to a blended format through the inclusion of an online environment. While quantitative methods could be used to further study the experiences of educators as they transition to a model of blended collaboration, this researcher recommends the use of qualitative methods to provide additional research of the lived experiences of educators as they push the boundaries of their collaborative practice.

**Concluding Thoughts**

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to explore how four secondary educators at a Midwest, urban high school experience transitioning their face-to-face collaborative practice to a blended model of collaboration. This research contributes to the body of knowledge on the development of a successful practice of blended collaboration through the results that emerged from the participants’ stories. The participants’ voices revealed results related to trust, teacher proficiency and self-efficacy regarding technology, the necessity of balance between
accountability and agency, and the importance of leadership. While the results can be viewed as separate entities related to transitioning collaboration to a blended practice, they speak much louder when viewed together as part of the fabric of educator collaboration.

The study further contributes to the body of knowledge of effective models of collaboration, through the considerations for practice designed to provide other educators assistance as they encourage the establishment of blended communities of practice in their own school sites. While additional research will be necessary to develop an organized process in moving forward, this study’s results and the considerations for practice show promise as many schools move forward in transitioning their face-to-face collaborative practice to a blended model of collaboration. The stories of success and failure that were shared in this study have the ability to light a path for all teachers collaborating in a collective effort to meet the various learning needs of their students.
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Appendix A

Research Checklist and Approval
Saint Joseph School District

Date Submitted: 8/30/12

Research Proposal Title: Collaboration in virtual spaces: the implementation of a staff wiki for supplementing collaboration in an alternative school

Principal Investigator(s): Michele Thomas

Checklist

☐ Completed "Application to Conduct Research in SJSD"
☐ Draft copy of "Informed consent" letter to study population/parents, if applicable
☐ Description of measurements and copies of any surveys
☐ Other, ______________________________

Approval of this research is contingent on adherence to district procedures as outlined in the document entitled "Conducting Research in the St. Joseph School District" and the information provided with the application. The district must be notified of any substantive changes to the information contained in the application. The district reserves the right to withdraw approval of research if the research is deemed to no longer be in the best interests of St. Joseph students, staff, or the district.

Research Application: ☑ Approved ☐ Denied

Signatures

[Signatures]

Assistant Director Assessment & Program Evaluation

Data Task Force Representative

Data Manager

Superintendent/Principal of Program or Building

Date of Consideration at SJSD Data Task Force 8/31/2012

8/15/2012
Appendix B

Participant Recruitment Script

Hello [name]. I am working on my doctoral project at Northeastern University and was hoping I could include you in my study. The title of my study is “Collaboration in Blended Spaces: Exploring the Lived Experiences of Collaborating Educators in a Midwestern High School.”

The Principal Investigator for this study is Dr. Sandy Nickel. Dr. Nickel is my advisor at the College of Professional Studies at Northeastern University. As the student researcher, I have selected you as one of eight participants because you have work in a department expanding face-to-face collaboration to include online collaborative tools. Your participation in this study, however, is completely voluntary. Even if you agree to begin the study, you may quit at any time.

I am interested in hearing your stories and making sense of your perception and understanding of your experiences in expanding from traditional collaboration practices to a blended format utilizing an online collaborative environment.
Appendix C

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

To the participant: As a staff member who participates in a blended community of practice during this 2015 – 2016 school year, you are invited to take part in a research study being conducted as part of the completion of a doctoral program in Education at Northeastern University’s College of Professional Studies. This form reiterates what the researcher has explained to you. You may ask any questions you have about the study. Once you have made a decision about your participation, share that decision with the researcher. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you choose to participate, you will be asked to sign this statement. The researcher will provide you with a copy for your own records.

Why is this research being conducted? The intent of this research is to determine how members of a community of practice, comprised of high school teachers, use online collaborative environments to support their work towards meeting common goals. One research question anchors this study: How do members of a face-to-face community of practice use online collaborative tools to work towards meeting common goals?

What will participants be asked to do? If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in 1 interview with the student researcher. Interviews will be audio recorded and the student researcher will take notes. The recordings will be transcribed by a professional transcriptionist and analyzed by the student researcher. You and your school will be assigned a pseudonym to protect confidentiality. The interview will focus on your professional background, your perceptions of face-to-face collaboration, and your experiences and perceptions of the integration of online collaborative tools and how those tools help your department work toward common goals. You will also be asked to review the transcript of your interview, as well as the final written account of your interview, but you are not required to do so.

Where will this research take place? The interview sessions will take place in a location of your choice and at a time that is convenient for you. Each interview will take approximately 60-minutes. You may be required to participate in a follow-up conversation with the student researcher if additional questions arise.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to participants? There is no foreseeable risk or discomfort to participants. You and your school will be assigned pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

Will participants benefit from this research? Although there is no direct benefit to participants, the information learned from this study may help administrators and teachers alike become more fully cognizant of the potential of blended collaboration practices for improved instructional effectiveness.

Who will see the information provided by participants? Participation in this study is confidential. Only the student researcher and advisor will see the information provided during interviews. No reports or publications will use the information in such a way that participants
can be identified. Participants will be given pseudonyms; they will not be identified by their correct names. Recordings and transcripts of interviews will be electronically stored in a secure location, with the originals stored in a locked cabinet at the student researcher’s home. As noted earlier, assigning pseudonyms at the start of the study will preserve anonymity of the participants. A list of the participants’ names and pseudonyms will be stored in a locked location separate from other related data.

**Can I stop my participation in this study?** Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any of the interview questions. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have.

**Who can participants contact if questions or problems?** If you have questions about the study, please feel free to contact:

Michele Thomason, Student Researcher
3612 E. Colony Sq.
St. Joseph, MO 64506
816-752-1145
thomason.m1969@gmail.com

or

Dr. Nancy Pawlyshyn, Principal Investigator
Northeastern University
360 Huntington Avenue
Boston, MA 02115
617-513-2215
s.nickel@neu.edu

**Who can be contacted about participants’ rights?**
Nan C. Regina
Director of Human Subject Research Protection
Northeastern University
960 Renaissance Park
Boston, MA 02115
617-373-4588
n.regina@neu.edu

You may call anonymously if you wish.

**Will I be paid for my participation?** You will not be paid for participating in this study.

**Will it cost me anything to participate?** You will not incur any costs for participating in this study

**I agree to participate in this research.**

__________________________________
Signature of Person Agreeing to Take Part

_________________________
Date
Printed Name of Person Above

Signature of Person Who Explained the Study to the Participant Named Above and Obtained Consent

Date

Printed Name of Person Above
Appendix D

Interview Guide

Introduction:

Hello and thank you so much for being a part in this research. The purpose of this study is to explore the stories and examine the experiences of teachers as they expand their common collaborative work to include an online environment. I plan to ask you several questions related to the purpose of this study and will be using this recording device to capture your responses. If it is ok with you, I would like to begin with a few background questions and then move to my research.

Interview Prompts:

Background Information

Please tell me a little about about who you are as a teacher.

Further Prompts:

• How many years have you been teaching?

• Over the course of your career what experiences have influenced your approach to teaching?

• Please describe the type of professional learner you are and what you do to grow professionally.
  
   o Tell me about your professional learning experiences with technology in general and specifically with Google Apps for Education.

The Domain

Please describe your understanding of the purpose of your departmental collaboration.

Further Prompts:
• In what ways did the 2015 national standardized assessment scores effect your department and how was the situation addressed through collaboration?

• In what ways has technology and specifically Google Apps for Education been used to address the issues identified by the Spring 2015 national standardized assessment data?
  o What have been the positive aspects of your department’s use of technology?
  o What have been the negative aspects?

**The Community**

Describe your department’s approach to collaboration.

*Further Prompts:*

• How did your department go about teamwork in the past year?

• Have there been times when department members have had to negotiate in order to reach common ground?
  o Describe what that was like.

• Reflect back on an experience where you learned with/from members of your department.
  o Describe the experience: What happened? What was that like?

• What growing pains have resulted from the addition of technology to the collaboration process?
  o In what ways have department members worked together to alleviate those growing pains?

• What do you feel the similarities and differences are of learning together face-to-face vs. learning together online?
The Practice

Reflect on this school year and describe the professional growth your department has experienced.

Further Prompts:

- What specific technology does your department use, and why?

- In what ways have department members used the identified technology to create new collaboration practices?
  - Can you give me a specific example?

- Describe the specific challenges your department has experienced by the addition of technology to your existing collaborative practices.

- How have members addressed those challenges?

- Moving forward, what additional support do you feel would be beneficial in order to further refine your departmental collaboration practices as they specifically relate to technology?

We are at the end of the interview. Is there anything else you would like to share? Your thoughts and experiences are sincerely appreciated. A draft of this transcript will be provided for your review.