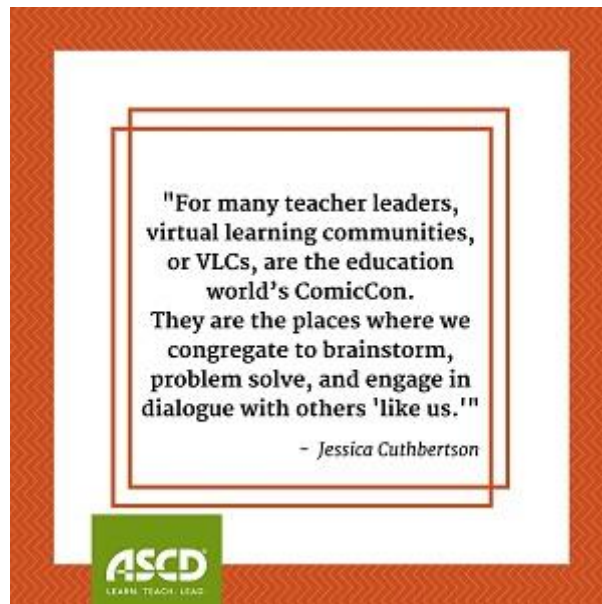


By *Jessica Cuthbertson*



This past summer, I was a spectator at [Denver's fourth annual ComicCon](#). I say "spectator" because, although I attended (and enjoyed) the event, I was far from navigating this experience like a true "insider." I observed my husband and his friends network with comic book authors, illustrators, and perfect strangers decked out in elaborate costumes. A sea of fanboys and girls of all ages were drawn together around a shared passion for comic books and pop culture. As a spectator, I recognized the feeling of togetherness and camaraderie. I connected with the idea that a large number of people with a collective body of knowledge reveled in the opportunity to "geek out" with others like them. I found myself thinking of communities where I feel like an "insider"—where formal or informal membership is rejuvenating and uplifting.

For many teacher leaders, virtual learning communities, or VLCs, are the education world's ComicCon. They are the places where we congregate to brainstorm, problem solve, and engage in dialogue with others "like us." They are the spaces where we feel at home using acronyms and edu-speak, where we seek affirmation and constructive feedback from colleagues we trust and admire, and where we don our metaphorical capes for other edu-geeks we may rarely (if ever) meet in person.

As I reflect on where and when I feel like my most authentic and vulnerable teacher leader self, VLCs top the list. Since entering the profession in the infancy years of NCLB, I've been a part of both productive and unproductive content and grade-level teams. I've connected with some colleagues and struggled to find common ground with others. I've worked at high-performing schools and schools on the state accountability clock. **But the one professional constant for me has been the network of informal mentors, peers, and professionals I've connected with outside school walls.**

As we prepare to enter a new era of teaching and learning — the **ESSA** era

— I see tremendous power and potential in the ever-evolving and expanding VLCs available to educators. Here are just a few ways VLCs add value to the profession:

- **Providing Creative Sandboxes:** VLCs give educators a place to create and test ideas. From advice on how to have a [conversation with a new principal](#) to tips for [preservice or early-career teachers](#) to ideas for [designing a teacher-powered school](#), **VLCs provide a creative sandbox where educators can dream, develop, and do amazing work with authentic feedback from each other.**
- **Serving as Safe Havens:** Educators need a place to question, process, and **think** through their instructional practices and roles as professionals **in a protected and non-evaluative place.** VLCs can act as a safe haven for hard questions and hypotheticals. Strong facilitation and clear norms in **VLCs create a protective cocoon for educators to express their fears, frustrations, and failures.**
- **Developing into Interdependent Networks:** Community is the cornerstone of any **vibrant VLC.** The best VLCs bring together educators and stakeholders that are invested in education and want to serve and learn from one another. This reciprocity and pay-it-forward mentality is especially critical in virtual spaces where relationships evolve through Twitter chats or discussion threads rather than face-to-face communication.

If you haven't connected to or engaged with a VLC, I encourage you to experience firsthand what colleagues outside of your direct teaching context have to offer. Check out established VLCs like [CTQ's Collaboratory](#), or join an [upcoming education Twitter chat](#). In turn, **you will find that your voice adds value to the community** and that "*geeking-out*" with like-minded professionals can feel a lot like having access to an arsenal of superhero supports.

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As a National Board–certified teacher and former [CTQ](#) teacherpreneur, she "geeks out" on adolescent literature, [edu-blogging](#), teacher leadership initiatives, and issues of policy and practice.

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