

Encouraging Teacher Collaboration: An Excerpt from an Upcoming Article

Categories: Professional Learning

The following blog is excerpted from a yet-to-be published article (written by Isabel McLean, Hollins Mills, and myself) on overcoming obstacles in building community in the Lesson Study process. We originally ran this post on July 18, 2012.

Through the Lesson Study process, a natural shift occurs in how participants define collaboration and engage in dialogue and discussion about curriculum. This shift happens gradually as the teachers focus their attention on designing a lesson that best matches their students' needs. As the teachers grapple with the challenges of understanding all educators' points of view, listening to varying ideas and strategies to meet all student needs, and coming to consensus; they engage in the deepest level of collaboration. They begin with what they already know, set a new definition as they challenge their own internal thoughts as reflected within the group, and finally, wholly define collaboration using the collective professional voice of the team working together around a common goal.

The Beginning: Collaboration-what Already Exists.

As teams of teachers begin the Lesson Study process, they bring a set a preconceived notions with them, mostly related to the belief that they are gathering to develop a lesson. As the team begins to craft team norms, the idea of collaboration is often a reflection of what currently exists in the county or district they teach in. Modes of collaboration that most educators have experienced include training, coaching, workshops, and curriculum guides.

The center of collaboration in most educators' experience is how they get along, move through the day, and work within a team given the limited time teachers have to meet with other educators in their building. Teachers focus on figuring out the most efficient way to manage the needs of the county curriculum with the needs of the parents, the needs of the time given to learning, and how to manage the students in the classroom. one teacher said, "So many times when we "plan" together we talk about the material that needs to be covered, not how to deliver the material. In LS we really had to sit down, take time, and think as a team about what components go into making a lesson succesfull. Having everyone's input and opinion helped create new ways of thinking outside of old routines."

Lesson Study is the most innovative way for educators to collaborate because it brings them back to what they are professionally trained to do. The combined teacher expertise guides the planning and implementation of the lesson. The teachers own the process,- they know their students and use shared experience and education to bring forth the best possible learning for the students in their schools. We trust the teachers to put to work what they know is best for students.

Collaboration: Personal Definitions Derived from Being Part of a Group That Asks, "What Is Collaboration?"

Lesson Study provides a framework to create a safe environment where every person's ideas are heard. New teachers sometimes refer to it as finding their voice. Facilitators in LS have a heightened awareness to honor every voice and recognize that even the

silence is a form of action. One teacher said, “My veteran colleagues would have to challenge themselves to analyze their methods and philosophies of teaching. I would not receive an easy pass and be dismissed as a know-nothing novice. As we began to plan our first lesson together, I knew that my own ideas would be just as valuable as my experienced teammates.”

Now that participants realize that lesson study is less about making a perfect lesson and more about collaborating as a team, they begin to break down previously held assumptions and agendas, that may prohibit a group from fully engaging. The individuals within the group begin to have an internal dialogue to understand the various roles needed to successfully work and collaborate within the larger context of a group. This internal dialogue from all group members helps to build a sense of connection, belonging, and safety. (Adaptive Classrooms) Teachers participating in LS have the opportunity to be reflective during the process, listen to colleagues’ ideas and motivations, question to learn and question intent, plan a lesson together, and come to consensus with other professionals in their community.

As the team works through the Lesson Study process, each member redefines and challenges their understanding of collaboration with this team. One second grade teacher said, “The experience forces teachers to collaborate more because we can only produce one lesson. We say we collaborate when we are planning day to day and sharing as a team, but in reality we each have different ways we interpret the ideas, language we use, and ideas for teaching that same shared content. Lesson Study makes us truly collaborate by making us dissect one lesson, questioning every move thoughtfully as a team. It is amazing how much a lesson can change (through dialogue) and the amount of rich discussion and debate that comes from many teachers who all have different views, beliefs, and styles, but are all focused with the same goal-the best learning experience for children.”

Collaboration: Team Definition Where a Collective Professional Voice Produces Actions Based on the Common Goal of Student Learning.

A common discourse emerges from the team. Team norms written early in the LS process no longer encompass the experiences felt by the team. One team shifted a team norm three times over the scope of their LS work as the team redefined collaboration. What began as “to listen with empathy and understanding” evolved into “members will give full attention to the team by looking at one another, engaging in conversation, and questioning when there is a lack of understanding,” and finally to “members will listen and participate in conversations with the intent to find consensus and understanding of a subject area while realizing that ideas are separate from the people sharing them.”

As the participants in LS work through the collaborative process they move from team building to team learning. They have become a unit working together on a common goal. They have learned how to challenge previous ideas on what works in teaching and what doesn’t. They collect data directly from the students during shared observation of a team member teaching the designed lesson. They analyze the data and discuss the implications of the results. They discuss how to adapt their lesson to more appropriately meet the student needs in the classroom. No longer is the process a hypothetical assessment of what may work. The conversation, anchored in data collected in real time, turns to what did/didn’t work and why? What did we do that caused these results? What can we do in the future to change these results? What are the long-term implications of the results on how we approach planning and teaching every day? The team has moved from a dialogue about the lesson to a discussion about lesson effectiveness and potential student engagement and learning.

Discussions lead to decisions that stick. Ineffective discussions focus on serial sharing and advocacy. Early in the LS process, participants become aware of when and why they share certain pieces of information and whether it is relevant to the shared goal of the team. Effective discussions consist of group member inquiry and thinking through ideas presented by and for the group. With a new shared understanding of individual goals, practices, and the definition of collaboration within the context of this group, differences

are resolved, new options are generated, and decisions can be made that will last over time (Adaptive Classrooms).