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Why Collaborative Inquiry?

Powerful professional learning designs provide the activities that make professional learning communities more than just a structure.

(Easton, 2008, p. 4)

Everyday educators face a variety of challenges. Some challenges are *technical* in nature while others are *adaptive* in nature. Technical challenges are ones in which the problem is clear, the knowledge and capacity to solve the issue already resides in the expertise of individuals, and solutions and implementation are readily understood. In education, a technical solution entails doing things we already know how to do—for example, increasing the penalty for late or missing work. A problem arises when doing what has always been done is not the right thing to do or does not result in the outcomes intended. An adaptive challenge is “one for which the necessary knowledge to solve the problem does not yet exist” (Vander Ark, 2006, p. 10). Adaptive challenges are more difficult to resolve as solutions and implementation require new learning and upset past ways of doing things—for example, raising awareness of ineffective grading practices. To tackle adaptive challenges, individuals must adopt new values and beliefs.

Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky (2009) noted that when individuals and organizations meet adaptive challenges, they themselves become something different—they adapt. Change of this magnitude is not easily accomplished, as people’s ideas about how things work are not easily reconstructed. By focusing efforts on professional learning approaches

"The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results." (Benjamin Franklin)

The adaptive challenges educators face vary in their nature and complexity. Educators might be grappling with one or more of the following issues:

- Supporting English Language Learners
- Closing the gap between groups of students in the areas of literacy and numeracy
- Accommodating students with learning disabilities
- Improving graduation rates
- Accessing background knowledge when working with groups of diverse students

Whatever student needs are identified, the challenge of change is "compounded by pressure from others to remain the same" (Levin, 2008, p. 81). Levin noted that effective change in schools comes from "thoughtful application of effective practices in particular contexts" (p. 81). When doing what has been done does not result in outcomes intended, real change is required. Real change comes and is sustained when goals are achieved in new ways under complex circumstances. When real change occurs, students and educators benefit.

that challenge mental models and engaging people in learning and working collaboratively, individuals and organizations will be more likely to meet adaptive challenges. Collaborative inquiry is a structure in which members of a professional learning community (PLC) come together to systematically examine their educational practices. Teams work together to ask questions, develop theories of action, determine action steps, and gather and analyze evidence to assess the impact of their actions. Throughout this process, teams test presuppositions about what they think will work against the evidence of what actually works (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009). By closely examining and reflecting on the results of their actions, individuals and teams begin to think differently. They begin to question long-standing beliefs and consider implications for their professional practices.

Leading educational researchers recognize the power of the PLC concept to transform schools and help educators meet the adaptive challenges confronting them and, therefore, continue to promote collaborative inquiry as a strategy for strengthening teaching and learning. In a study that examined specific characteristics of school improvement plans that were most related to student achievement, Reeves (2010) found that the *inquiry process* was one of nine characteristics that had a measurable and significant effect on gains in student achievement in reading and mathematics in both elementary and secondary schools. Reeves (2010) encouraged teachers to take an active role in expressing and testing hypotheses and backed the notion that collaborative inquiry can have a profound impact on the professional practices not only of the participants but of their colleagues as well. Katz, Earl, and Ben Jaafar (2009) included collaborative inquiry that challenged thinking and practice as a key component in

their theory of action for enabling impactful PLCs. Supovitz (2006) noted that when members of PLCs engage together in investigating challenges of practice, their understanding of those challenges grows deeper and is more unified, practice grows more sophisticated and powerful, and the group develops a tighter sense of camaraderie and common purpose. As a result, teams can construct common understanding, share knowledge and experience, and develop common goals (Supovitz, 2006).

Teacher-driven inquiry is not a new approach. For years, Lieberman among others has promoted a culture of inquiry where teachers have opportunities to discuss, think about, try, and hone new practices through structures such as problem-solving groups or decision-making teams. Promoting a contextual and collaborative approach, Lieberman and Miller (2004) stated, “The concept of learning in practice is now viewed as foundational to teacher leadership; it rests on the idea that learning is more social, collaborative, and context-dependent than was previously thought” (p. 21).

Although it is not a new approach, collaborative inquiry is more frequently being used to address school improvement efforts. As elements of and conditions for effective professional learning are identified and better understood, educators are recognizing the potential impact that collaborative inquiry could have on sustaining changes in practice and ultimately achieving greater success for *all* students. Learning Forward (Killion, Hord, Roy, Kennedy, & Hirsh, 2012) identified standards that can be used to guide the design, implementation, and evaluation of professional learning. Under the category of “Learning Communities,” Learning Forward promotes an inquiry approach stating that high-quality professional learning includes learning communities that “apply a cycle of continuous improvement to engage in inquiry, action research, data analysis, planning, implementation, reflection, and evaluation” (Killion et al., 2012, p. 16). Learning Forward also promotes a collaborative approach to learning noting, “The more one educator’s learning is shared and supported by others, the more quickly the culture of continuous improvement, collective responsibility, and high expectations for students and educators grows” (p. 17). More frequently, educational leaders are engaging

Some educators associate collaborative inquiry and action research with experimental research approaches and hesitate to participate, as they are not confident in their skills to conduct research. While collaborative inquiry is a process in which educators come together to examine their educational practices systematically using techniques of research, the intent is not for participants to focus on rigorous research designs or methodologies. Collaborative inquiry is primarily a process to support professional learning. Since it is contextual in nature, it is not expected that findings are generalized to a larger population.

practitioners in the process of inquiry, recognizing that it embodies the characteristics of high quality professional learning and valuing its potential for school improvement.

While collaborative inquiry is becoming a more commonly used professional learning model and it has been shown to be an effective approach to sustaining meaningful changes in practice, studies show that the investment does not always yield anticipated results. Katz (2010) stated that the majority of learning communities do not produce sustainable changes in professional understanding, classroom practice, or student achievement. Mitchell and Sackney (2009) suggested that PLCs “have remarkably little impact on the ways in which teachers teach, students learn, or leaders lead” (p. 12). After many observations across various settings, the researchers concluded that “deep, rich, authentic learning promised by learning community discourse” (p. 9) was evident in only a small number of high-capacity schools. Fullan (2006) also noted that it was common for communities to be operating on a superficial level.

As the adaptive nature of this work unfolds, facilitators face challenges in their efforts to embed collaborative inquiry into the work of PLCs in a way that is purposeful, productive, and impactful. DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Karhanek (2010) noted that one of the most common mistakes educators make as they attempt to implement PLC concepts is to regard collaboration as the end itself, rather than as a means to an end. They noted that collaboration would impact student achievement in a positive way only if collective inquiry focused on the right work. Easton (2008) warned, “Without meaningful learning activities that occur during PLC time, PLCs may go the way of so many other structures that were instituted without any attention to what teachers and students do that would take advantage of those structures” (p. 4). This book answers the question for leaders of educational change: *How can I facilitate teams through the stages of collaborative inquiry while ensuring the work is purposeful, productive, and impactful?*

A FOUR-STAGE MODEL

This resource has been designed for facilitators interested in guiding school teams through a formal process of inquiry. It is of increasing importance to support individuals and teams through the change process, as collaborative inquiry requires people to think, reflect, and work together in new ways. Simply providing time for teachers’ growth opportunities is not enough. The tools to support meaningful collaboration that is focused on what matters most—identifying and addressing the learning needs of students—are needed as well. To ensure the integrity of the design so that

greater success for *all* students can be realized, it is imperative that facilitators develop a deep understanding of how to support teams through the process. The four-stage model outlined in this book complete with the insights, suggestions, and prompts, will provide facilitators with what they need to guide teams so that the efforts of the team make a difference for the students they serve.

The four-stage model includes the following:

Stage 1: Framing the Problem. During this stage, facilitators assist teams as they determine a meaningful focus, develop an inquiry about a particular link between professional practices and student results, and formulate a theory of action.

Stage 2: Collecting Evidence. In the second stage, facilitators guide teams in developing shared understandings and building additional knowledge and competencies. Teams determine the type of evidence to collect. They also determine when, where, and how it will be collected.

Stage 3: Analyzing Evidence. Once teams feel they have gathered enough information to address the question posed, facilitators guide teams through a five-step approach to analyzing evidence. Teams learn how to make meaning of data by identifying patterns and themes and formulating conclusions. As teams refine their thinking, they revisit their theory of action accordingly.

Stage 4: Documenting, Sharing, and Celebrating. During this final stage, teams come together to document, share, and celebrate their new understandings. Teams consider next steps by identifying additional student learning needs and reflecting on what they learned through their inquiries. Finally, teams debrief the process by considering how their work was reflective of the characteristics of collaborative inquiry.

Once facilitators engage teams in collaborative inquiry, they will find it is a more cyclical than linear model. Teams cycle through the stages, revisiting each stage as they change and refine their thinking.

The four stages of collaborative inquiry (framing the problem, collecting evidence, examining evidence, and documenting, sharing, and celebrating) are the same stages used in action research. The difference between the two approaches is that collaborative inquiry is conducted by a group of educators interested in addressing a school, department, division, or common classroom issue driven by student learning needs. The work is often connected to a broader district and/or school improvement strategy. Action research is conducted by individuals and a single classroom is more often the unit for improvement.

GETTING STARTED

In preparing to lead teams, there are a few things for facilitators to consider. For example, facilitators need to consider issues regarding timing, including when to begin and the length of the cycle of inquiry. When forming a collaborative inquiry team considerations include optimal size, participants, and recruitment strategies. In addition, facilitators should consider ways to foster academic discourse. These ideas are expanded on in the section that follows.

Timing

When is the best time during the school year to begin? How long might it take to complete a cycle? These are some commonly asked questions as people prepare to get started. If the work is going to be connected to larger improvement efforts, the best time to introduce collaborative inquiry is when the process of school improvement planning takes place. In many school districts, school improvement planning begins in the last month of the previous school year—projecting ahead for the year to come. Some school districts wait until the current school year begins to conduct a comprehensive needs assessment. In any case, if collaborative inquiry is going to be used as a structure to guide school improvement efforts, the two processes must begin simultaneously to complement each other. By introducing collaborative inquiry as a strategy for school improvement, it will help team members understand how it relates to the work that is already happening in schools.

The length of the cycle will depend on the team, the question, the school year calendar, and structural conditions. For teams new to the process, it may take longer to complete a cycle than it would for teams who have experienced it before. It is similar to when teachers introduce a new strategy to students. Initially, students' cognitive energy is spent processing how to use the strategy. Once they become familiar with how the strategy works, they are able to focus cognitive energy on the content and advance their learning. Once collaborative inquiry teams get used to the stages and engage in one full cycle, they will be able to use their time more efficiently. The length of the cycle will also depend on the question posed. Questions that identify a change in classroom practice that requires a steep learning curve for participating teachers will increase the length of time the team engages in professional learning and the implementation of strategies in the classroom. A skilled facilitator will ensure that the practices identified are high-leverage

while scaffolding learning accordingly so that team members feel safe in the learning environment. The length of the cycle will also depend on the school year calendar. Facilitators should be aware of the start and end dates of terms when working with teams in schools that operate in a semester system. Ideally, cycles should be completed during a single semester. Finally, the length of time to complete a cycle will also depend on supportive structural conditions. Hord (2008) described supportive structural conditions as “those such as time to meet, a place to meet, and policies and resources that support the staff coming together for study and learning” (p. 12). Teams will be most productive if supported and provided with time embedded in their daily practice to engage in the work.

Forming a Collaborative Inquiry Team

Collaborative inquiry teams may comprise as few as two educators. Teams ranging from five to seven participants are ideal. When teams consist of more than seven people, facilitators might find it challenging to ensure that all voices are heard. In addition, depending on the makeup of the team, the larger the team becomes, the more difficult it may be to identify a common student learning need. However, larger teams may work as long as the individuals coming together are able to identify a school, department, or division issue driven by the consideration of common and current student learning needs.

Identifying informal leaders who are open to sharing their practice and who have the ability to engage and motivate other staff is important. Katz et al. (2009) suggested that formal leaders “distribute leadership, identifying those teacher leaders who are in the position to lead in a focus area because of their expertise” (p. 75). Additionally, the collaborative inquiry team should consist of individuals who are able to take action and who are willing to engage in and promote an inquiry approach to professional learning in their schools, departments, or divisions.

When recruiting individuals, facilitators might consider the idea of “starting with why” proposed by Sinek (2009). Sinek suggested that for leaders to inspire action, they need to start with *why* rather than *how* or *what*. While *what* people do serves as proof of what they believe, *why* they do it represents their purpose and beliefs. Consider the following two approaches. In the first example, the facilitator’s recruitment script begins with *what*, while in the second approach, the recruitment strategy begins with *why*.

Example 1

WHAT—"This year, teachers will conduct collaborative inquiry while participating in a professional learning community."

HOW—"Forty minutes a week will be structured into your schedule. Teachers in the same division will share common time in which they will come together to investigate an issue stemming from an identified common student learning need."

WHY—"As a result of our collaboration, we will all be better equipped to address the learning needs of our students." (Donohoo, 2012)

Example 2

WHY—"I believe that students deserve the very best education but they come to us with gaps in their understanding and that makes it difficult and challenging for educators to meet the diverse needs of all learners."

HOW—"We can work together to identify the gaps in our knowledge based on identified student learning needs. Collaboratively, we can learn about different approaches, identify strategies to test them, assess their impact, and revise them accordingly."

WHAT—"Collaborative inquiry is an approach for teacher development and learning and it provides a structure where teachers and administrators come together to continuously seek and share learning and then act on what they have learned."

Sinek (2009) suggested that great and inspiring leaders appeal to people's emotions and inspire action by starting with purposes, causes, or beliefs rather than describing the *what*. Heath and Heath (2010) also noted that in successful change efforts, leaders speak in ways that influence emotions and not with analytical arguments. Since people are motivated by emotions, starting with *why* will prove to be an effective recruitment strategy for facilitators when forming collaborative inquiry teams.

In addition, team members should be made aware of the commitment of time and energy that will be required throughout the process. When recruiting individuals, it is important to share with potential team members an overview of the four stages of collaborative inquiry along with the estimated length of time involved so that they know what is expected of them. Some individuals may be hesitant to commit but for those who do agree to participate, having clear expectations will lead to the creation of a healthier and more productive team.

Fostering Academic Discourse

MacDonald (2011) described a “culture of nice” as the “underlying culture that inhibits the team from reaching a level of rigorous collaborative discourse where teachers are challenging each other’s and their own thinking, beliefs, assumptions, and practice” (p. 45). The author pointed out that “teachers must be willing to expose their struggles and failures with their colleagues, and colleagues must be willing to tell the truth, or teams will go through the motions of collaborative inquiry but never see results” (p. 45). When facilitators enter into this process, they must be prepared to foster academic discourse that shifts from a culture of nice so that team members can gain insights into their practices and results for students can be realized.

To produce meaningful change, facilitators need to provide opportunities for teams to respectfully discuss differences between beliefs within the organization. It is difficult and challenging work. Fullan (2011) pointed out that adaptive challenges and social complexity are one and the same, noting, “It is not that the problem is mysterious; it is more that helping people discover and embrace change is socially complex” (p. 18). At times, discussions will make people feel uncomfortable, but it is necessary to engage in difficult conversations. Facilitators can begin by valuing and acknowledging that people have different ways of interpreting things. Encouraging team members to listen with curiosity and not judgment will help people to engage in conversations in respectful ways. When discussing classroom practices and/or student work, facilitators should ensure that participants provide descriptions rather than offering interpretations. City et al. (2009) noted that to talk to one another productively about what we see in classrooms, we have to describe what we see “without the heavy judgmental overlay that we typically bring” (p. 87). Specific descriptions provided about classroom practices and/or student work will give participants an enormous amount of information to reflect on in terms of their practice. If the facilitator is not prepared to foster these types of conversations, the time spent engaging in the process is unlikely to result in sustained changes in practice.

Activities and prompts contained in this book have been designed to assist facilitators in structuring conversations so that people’s assumptions are safely challenged. Focusing conversation on evidence rather than opinion, providing opportunities for all voices to be heard, and promoting reflection on professional practices will help facilitators shift the culture from “nice” to a more honest discourse where results can be realized.

Senge (1990) used the term “learning organizations” to describe organizations that transformed themselves to meet adaptive challenges and

become knowledge-generating versus merely knowledge-using organizations. Vander Ark (2006) noted that meeting an adaptive challenge required “creating the knowledge and tools to solve the problem in the act of working on it” (p. 10). To shape an organization that can generate the knowledge to meet adaptive challenges, system leaders must provide opportunities for teams of learners to engage in inquiry, develop and apply theories of action, collect and analyze relevant data, reflect on practice, determine next steps and actions, and evaluate the process. Collaborative inquiry provides the structure for teams to collaboratively generate knowledge while investigating problems of practice. This book was developed to guide facilitators in leading teams in meeting adaptive challenges. A systematic approach to conducting collaborative inquiry is outlined in the chapters that follow.