



- 2 Role Playing a Powerful Conversation
- 3 Handout for Role Play Observers
- 5 Background on the School and the Role Players
- 6 Description of Roles
- 7 Script for the Role Play of a Powerful Conversation
- 10 Innovation Configuration Handout

POWERFUL *conversations*

BY STEPHANIE HIRSH

Cathy Gassenheimer, director of the Alabama Best Practices Center, believes high-quality professional development is essential to improved student learning. In 2002, she instituted a process to identify and showcase schools with high-quality professional development. Instead of asking schools to participate in a typical application process, Gassenheimer invited applicants to join her in a facilitated conversation about their staff development practice in relation to the NSDC Standards for Staff Development.

What resulted were conversations that were so powerful that they propelled the faculty toward an expanded understanding of professional development. The Best Practices Center ultimately decided to defer its recognition process in order to focus on developing this new “powerful conversations” strategy.

We were so impressed with the results of Gassenheimer’s work that we have used her template of a “powerful conversations” activity to introduce members to a significant new piece of work by NSDC: the innovation configurations for the NSDC standards.

Our work on the

Innovation Configurations (ICs) for the NSDC standards has just been published. What we now have to share with the field is a comprehensive instrument that describes what each of the 12 standards look like in practice. The ICs provide detailed descriptions of each standard in action and a tool for assessing fidelity of practice. This tool enables school staffs to share information and to take the initial steps in implementing new policies, programs, or processes. (Read more about the ICs in the November issue of *Results*.)

The ICs cover all 12 standards and five role groups — teachers, principals, central office staff members, superintendents, and school board members. The activity in this issue is limited to exploring a very small portion of what is available.

We hope this issue of *Tools for Schools* will

introduce you to both a powerful strategy and a significant piece of work. After using this activity, we believe schools will be a better position to determine their relationship to the standards and, therefore, better able to plan how to improve their staff development practice. ■

**Use a new strategy to
learn about new work**



Role Playing a Powerful Conversation



Purpose

To enable a school staff to experience a powerful conversation, dialogue, and discussion; to use the Innovation Configuration to identify needed areas for attention for staff development practice and planning; and to prepare participants to have powerful conversations with colleagues

Ideally, the staff participating in this conversation has already been introduced to and understands the difference between dialogue and discussion. Definitions of both are provided on pages 8 and 9.

Preparation

- Make enough copies of the background information (page 6) on each character so that everyone in the room has a copy.
- Make six copies of the script (pages 7-9) so that each role player has a copy.
- Create necklace signs for each role player with their character titles: principal, math department head, 6th-grade math teacher, 8th-grade language arts teacher, 7th-grade social studies teacher/school-based staff developer, and central office director of instruction.
- Set up the room with six chairs in a circle, for the role players. Arrange chairs for the remaining workshop participants in an outer circle around the inner circle of six people so they may observe the inner circle.
- Give each role player a handout that includes the background for each role and a script that indicates how the conversation will unfold.
- Give each observer a handout that includes the background for each role and a handout with questions that will be used to debrief the conversation and which can guide their observation of the conversation.
- Give each role player and each observer a copy of the teachers portion of the Innovation Configurations on the Learning Communities and Data-Driven standards (pages 10-11).

Facilitator to the group

This is a scripted demonstration in which role players are asked to stay in character, playing the role as they can imagine them in real schools. Observers should take note of the role play and be prepared to answer the questions in the Handout for Role Play Observers on pages 3 and 4.

Handout for Role Play Observers

Questions for observers to consider as they debrief the conversation

1. What are the differences between the dialogue and the discussion/debate parts of the conversation? Were the two modes clear? Give examples.

2. Was this a powerful conversation? Why? Why not? Give examples to support your opinion.

3. What skills, knowledge, and conditions does a group need for a powerful conversation? Can you expect a powerful conversation to develop the first time a group tries it? Why? Why not?

Continued on page 4

Handout for Role Play Observers

Continued from page 3

Debriefing questions for participants and observers

1. How did the Innovation Configuration contribute to understanding the NSDC standards?

2. Why conduct a powerful conversation around the Innovation Configuration? What is its value?

3. What are some next steps you would expect the group to consider?

Background on the School and the Role Players



Description of Green Mountain Middle School

Green Mountain Middle School is a neighborhood school with 610 students in grades 5-8. The enrollment is 64% Hispanic, 20% African Americans, 16% white, and 1% Asian-American. The school was built in 1944, has been well maintained with current repairs and paint, and attractive landscaping.

The school's student achievement scores place it in the state's "acceptable" range, but according to the new federal guidelines the school will be placed in the "needs to improve" category. The school staff has low energy and enthusiasm for the work, and staff and student attendance are in the low 80% range.

A new mathematics curriculum was introduced in the previous year, but no one seems to know its implementation status.

The staff is organized both vertically in academic subject departments and horizontally by grade level. Each content department meets once a month; the grades meet every other week. All meetings occur on campus and during the regular work day for teachers.

The meeting that we will observe occurs in mid-September. This group is expected to become the staff development sub-committee of the school improvement committee for the school. In this meeting, the objective is to find a focus for their work.

The role play participants represent various school and district staff positions, and each participant has both a public and private agenda that influences their participation.

Description of Roles

Role players and observers should read each description of the roles to themselves. This will ensure that both role play participants and observers are clear on the background of each character.

Principal

You have been assigned to this school for three years. During that time, the student population and the staff have been stable. Student achievement scores have remained flat at the low acceptable range. You have been to a retreat with fellow principals who are studying the new NSDC Standards for Staff Development. Your conversations and reflections at the retreat — away from the hustle and bustle of the school — have caused you to wonder if attention to the standards could re-energize your school's staff and students.

7th-grade social studies teacher/ school-based staff developer

You are a highly regarded social studies teacher. Your students always win prizes at the Academic Fair each spring. Further, the staff respects you and considers you both creative in teaching and fun to be around. You have embraced professional development and have gained some knowledge and skills as a result of work that you did in a previous school. You are not sure what your new job entails in this environment and you wonder if you can do two half-time jobs well: that is, half time as a social studies teacher and half time as the school-based staff developer. The principal is handing off this meeting to you, although he has prepared the staff in advance for the meeting. He will support you and provide resources, but it is up to you to produce an effective staff development program. He has indicated that he wants you to use the new NSDC Standards for Staff Development to design the school's program.

Math department chair

You have been at the school for two years and were instrumental in convincing the math faculty to adopt a new mathematics program for all grades. The district's math specialist as well as the school improvement committee is pushing you to improve math scores on the state student achievement test. You have not been able to secure and provide much staff development on the new curriculum, and you're not sure what the staff development should look like.

6th-grade math teacher

You have been a teacher for 16 years, teaching all the lower grades, K-6. You are sure you know what your students need in mathematics and how to teach them effectively, relying heavily on lecture and assigning pages of problems from the text book. You don't see a need to learn any of "that new stuff," but you don't reveal this publicly.

8th-grade language arts teacher

You are a mid-career teacher who wants to leave Green Mountain School, but so far have not found another appealing job. You want to leave because, while the principal has begun to get parents involved, he has given little attention to teachers and their needs. You're interested in more collaborative work and hope that this can happen. But if it doesn't, you do not want to be too involved in planning staff development, although you will be careful about this so that you can ask for a good letter of reference for another job.

Central office director of instruction

Central office has never before had a director of instruction — nor has it had a director of staff development. When you were hired last spring, the superintendent made it clear that this school needed to become motivated, energized, and focused on energizing the students. Parents at this school expect their kids to go to college, and many go to the state land grant college, but none are prepared to go to an Ivy League school. You have been studying the NSDC Standards for Staff Development and wondering where to start with this committee.

Script for the Role Play of a Powerful Conversation

The role play begins by having each participant introduce himself or herself to the observers.

Speaker #1 — Principal:

I'm (give your own name). As principal, I'll be participating with you in the meeting today which is our first one for this school year. I hope this group will be interested in serving as the school's staff development committee. I placed a copy of NSDC's staff development standards in your mail boxes last week, requesting that you read the materials before today. I hope that we will use our skills in dialogue that we learned last year, so that we hear each other clearly and meaningfully. Then, when we've all shared, we can move to the discussion mode to make a decision about how we should proceed with our work as the staff development committee.

We have a new position this year and our new school-based staff developer will be conducting these meetings.

Speaker #2 — 7th-grade social studies teacher/school-based staff developer:

I'm (give your own name). As the principal noted, I will serve in the new position of school-based staff developer. I'm not sure what this means since it is a new position, but I am excited about it and I expect that we will all learn how to make this position contribute to our staff development work.

You probably know that I am very keen about professional development and eager for us to create an effective program for ourselves. You probably also know that I value collaboration and collegial work, so I expect that we will be sharing time and ideas.

Speaker #3 — Math department chair:

I'm (give your own name). Well, I'd like for us to provide some staff development to the math teachers so they are clearer about how to teach the new program. In addition, all the teachers need an orientation to the program so they understand its philosophy and support all the kids in their efforts to improve their mathematics skills. The teachers need to know how to look at our achievement data and interpret it so they can make good decisions about instruction, but I'm not sure they know how to study data. I've tried to pull our math department together to learn but we're having trouble finding time.

Speaker #4 — 6th-grade math teacher:

I'm (give your own name) and I like the idea of the math teachers coming together to learn. We chat one-to-one about the math research and we trade and share resources. Although I'm a seasoned math teacher, there's a lot I don't know — and I regret that we're not taking action to further develop our capacities. I expect there is much I could learn from the younger teachers who are more recently out of college, although I wonder if we should take the time to implement a whole new math program.

Speaker #5 — 8th-grade language arts teacher:

I'm (give your own name). I'm really interested in some practical staff development; I need renewal. I wonder if we all really have sufficient expertise in using our data to make decisions for instruction for the kids. I hope this committee can come up with some meaningful ways to do staff development that doesn't take place after school or on Saturdays when I'm worn out. What can we do on the budget — and what is the budget? What are our options for doing staff development anyway?

Speaker #6 — Central office director of instruction:

I'm (give your own name). I've been in central office for six months and feel that I'm getting to know the schools. I am pleased to be meeting with you today. I have background in effective teaching and staff development, and I hope I can make a contribution to your planning. I'm hearing staff's interest in learning new curriculum and instruction, and I'm hearing several of you commenting on learning with each other. Did I get that right?

The person playing the role of the 7th-grade social studies teacher/school-based staff developer steps in and facilitates the remainder of the conversation.

Yes, I think I also heard our committee comment and refer to two of the standards that we have read about in the materials our principal gave us before our meeting today. Those standards are Standard 1: Learning Communities, and Standard 4: Data-Driven. According to the assessment that we administered week before last, we scored low on Standards 1

Continued on page 8

Script for the Role Play of a Powerful Conversation

Continued from page 7

and 4. So, our assessment today of our use of the staff development standards is consistent with our assessment on the instrument. Would it be OK if we look at those two standards and figure out where we stand on them as a faculty, and if they might be a good place to start our staff development work?

Heads nod OK.

So, let's look first at the data-driven material. Look at the introduction to that standard in the teachers' section of the IC book, and the maps that indicate desired outcomes for that standard.

That will give us a better understanding about what doing that standard would look like in our classrooms, and also provide some guidance in assessing where we are as a school with that standard.

Give the group a few minutes to find the material and review it.

First, what student achievement data do our school and the teachers have? (They should mention standardized tests and informal assessments that measure student performance

in relation to content of math, language arts, social studies, science, etc. Further, they should mention examining student work to get a firsthand look at what students are doing.)

What data are we using to assess student performance? Could we circle the group and invite each person to report what data is being used and how? And, as suggested, could we use the dialogue mode for our conversation (see box on page 9 for a description of dialogue). Just be descriptive so that we may pool information; no judgments are to be made about each person's report.

Each participant should respond to this question in the character of the role he or she is playing, with descriptions leading to the conclusion that the staff is not operating at a high quality level of using data.

So, now, let's slip into the discussion mode (see box below for a description of discussion) and determine where we think Green Mountain generally falls on the IC maps regarding the four Desired Outcomes for Standard 4 on using data.

Continued on page 9

Definition: Discussion

Discussion leads to decisions. Skillful discussions display rigorous critical thinking, mutual respect, weighing of options, and decision making that serves the group's vision, values, and goals. In discussion we might hear comments like, "We need to clarify our goals before talking about solutions."

Most school staffs are unaware that they can choose a way of talking that is different from the culturally embedded norms. Our media-saturated world bombards us with arguments framed by commentators as point-counterpoint, pro and con, left versus right, and other polarities. We carry these images into our conversations. They frame how we listen to others and how we speak. If we are not careful, we

listen not to understand but to hear the errors or logical gaps in others' presentations, or we jump in to make a point.

The term discussion shares linguistic roots with words such as percussion, concussion, and discuss. In its most ineffective form, discussion is a hurling of ideas at one other. Often it takes the form of serial sharing and serial advocacy. Participants attempt to reach decisions through a variety of either voting or consensus techniques. When discussion is unskilled and dialogue is absent, decisions are often of poor quality, represent the opinions of the most vocal members or the leader, lack group commitment, or do not stay in place.

Script for the Role Play of a Powerful Conversation

Continued from page 8

The dialogue mode shifts to discussion as group members promote their judgments about where the school is on the IC maps for the data-driven standards. Their discussion leads to a general conclusion that the school is at

- *Level 3 to 4, on Desired Outcome 4.1*
- *Level 4 to 5, on Desired Outcome 4.2*
- *Level 4 to 5, on Desired Outcome 4.3*
- *Level 3 on Desired Outcome 4.4*

Alright. I hear you conclude that our school is not at a sufficiently high level of using data so that could be a place for considering our planning for staff development.

Before we do that, let's look at the material on learning communities. Read the intro and review the desired outcomes on the IC maps and their levels of descriptions.

Give the group a few minutes to do this.

How are we behaving in our school related to learning communities as described in the IC maps? Could we hear from each person in the dialogue format, to describe what their experience has been with this standard?

Again, the descriptions should be varied across the group and reflect generally where the person is according to their background, and what was provided in the material that described each person.

Ah, now that we've heard from everybody, what do you think about where we are with learning communities, and why? Let's now use the discussion format to decide where we are in terms of the learning communities standard.

The group discusses each of the three desired outcomes for this standard, suggesting that the school is at:

- *Level 3 to 5 on Desired Outcome 1.1*
- *Level 4 on Desired Outcome 1.2*
- *Level 5 on Desired Outcome 1.3*

Ah, there seems to be a lot that we should be giving attention to, regarding learning communities, which is a structure or means by which to go about our learning; and, that the content of our learning should be directed toward using data for instructional decision making. This has been a rich and informative meeting.

Should we set a meeting for a planning session where we will address these two standards that we have identified. We need to decide what action steps to take to improve our professional development practices. Meanwhile, we should develop some process to keep the entire faculty, especially the school improvement committee, informed about what we are doing, and involved with us.

Heads nod, and the meeting is dismissed. ■

Definition: Dialogue

Dialogue leads to collective meaning making and sharing understanding. It builds a sense of connection and belonging, and creates an emotional and cognitive safety zone where ideas flow for examination without judgement. It connects individuals to their underlying motivations and mental models. This form of talk is the foundation for coherent, sustained effort and community building. In dialogue we hear phrases like, "An assumption I have is that . . ."

Dialogue is a reflective learning process in which group

members seek to understand one another's viewpoints and deeply held assumptions. The word dialogue comes from the Greek dialogos. Dia means "through" and "logos" means "the word." In this process of "meaning making through words," group members inquire into their own and one another's beliefs, values, and mental models to better understand how things work in their world. Each participant does much of the deepest work internally.

Innovation Configuration Handout

Data-Driven: Staff development that improves the learning of all students uses disaggregated student data to determine adult learning priorities, monitor progress, and help sustain continuous improvement.

The teacher ...

Desired Outcome 4.1: Analyzes disaggregated student data to identify adult learning priorities at the classroom, school, and district levels.

Level 1: Analyzes a variety of disaggregated data to determine the learning priorities of the adults in the district, school, and grade level or content area.

Level 2: Analyzes a variety of disaggregated data to identify professional learning priorities for the adults within the school.

Level 3: Analyzes a variety of disaggregated data to identify professional learning priorities for the grade level or content area.

Level 4: Reviews a variety of disaggregated data to identify personal (individual) learning priorities.

Level 5: Refrains from analyzing any data to determine professional learning priorities.

Desired Outcome 4.2: Analyzes a variety of disaggregated data to identify learning needs of professionals.

Level 1: Analyzes both student achievement and learning results, as well as other data including discipline, grade retention, graduation rates, enrollment in advanced courses, etc. to determine learning needs of professionals. Ensures that data are disaggregated by gender, SES, ethnicity, etc.

Level 2: Ensures that data are disaggregated by race, gender, SES, and special needs. Analyzes a variety of student learning results such as a norm-referenced tests, student work samples, student portfolios, district-designed tests to determine learning needs of professionals.

Level 3: Analyzes a variety of student learning results such as norm-referenced tests, student work samples, student portfolios, district-designed tests to determine learning needs of professionals.

Level 4: Analyzes student achievement results (norm-referenced and criterion-referenced) to determine learning needs of professionals.

Level 5: Reviews classroom data and student files to identify the learning needs of professionals.

Level 6: Refrains from analyzing any data to determine learning needs of professionals.

Desired Outcome 4.3: Works with colleagues to use disaggregated data to establish professional learning goals.

Level 1: Meets with colleagues as a whole school to use disaggregated data to determine professional learning goals. Adjusts instructional program based on the review of the data.

Level 2: Meets with a learning team to use disaggregated data to determine professional learning goals.

Level 3: Meets with grade-level or content area groups to use data to determine professional learning goals.

Level 4: Meets with professional staff to review data to determine professional learning goals.

Level 5: Works alone to determine individual professional learning goals.

Desired Outcome 4.4: Analyzes relevant student data in order to monitor and revise school and classroom improvement strategies.

Level 1: Analyzes student data continuously (at least four times a year) to monitor classroom and school improvements. Uses baseline data to monitor improvements across the school year.

Level 2: Analyzes student data at the beginning and end of the school year to monitor classroom and school improvements.

Level 3: Analyzes student data at the end of the year to monitor classroom and school improvements.

Level 4: Does not analyze student data to monitor classroom and school improvements.

Source: NSDC *Standards for Staff Development, Revised*, 2001 and *Moving NSDC's Staff Development Standards into Practice: Innovation Configurations* by NSDC and SEDL, 2003.

Continued on page 11

Innovation Configuration Handout

Continued from page 10

Learning Communities: 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.

The teacher ...

Desired Outcome 1.1: Meets regularly with colleagues during the school day to plan instruction.

Level 1: Meets regularly with learning team during scheduled time within the school day to develop lesson plans, examine student work, monitor student progress, assess the effectiveness of instruction, and identify needs for professional learning.

Level 2: Meets regularly with learning team during the school day to plan instruction, examine student work, and monitor student progress.

Level 3: Works with learning team on special instructional projects during planning time.

Level 4: Works with others on non-instructional issues. Addresses personal concerns, not group issues.

Level 5: Uses planning time for individual planning.

Level 6: Uses planning time for non-instructional tasks (e.g. management, personal tasks).

Desired Outcome 1.2: Aligns collaborative work with school improvement goals.

Level 1: Participates frequently with all professional staff members to discuss, document, and demonstrate how their work aligns with school and district goals. Engages in professional learning with colleagues to support this work.

Level 2: Aligns the work of the learning team with schoolwide goals. Works in a learning team (grade level, subject matter, interdisciplinary, vertical) to address issues related to the grade or subject area.

Level 3: Works in a learning team (grade level, subject matter, interdisciplinary, vertical) to address issues related to specific grade or subject area.

Level 4: Works alone; addresses individual issues rather than school or grade-level issues.

Desired Outcome 1.3: Participates in learning teams, some of whose membership extends beyond the school.

Level 1: Participates in state, regional, districtwide and/or national networks. Participates in interdisciplinary or subject matter/grade-level learning teams.

Level 2: Participates in districtwide and regional networks and interdisciplinary or subject matter/grade-level learning teams.

Level 3: Participates in both interdisciplinary and subject matter/grade-level learning teams within the district.

Level 4: Participates in interdisciplinary learning teams and/or subject matter or grade-level teams only.

Level 5: Participates in individual learning outside grade level, subject area, and/or school.

Source: *NSDC Standards for Staff Development, Revised, 2001* and *Moving NSDC's Staff Development Standards into Practice: Innovation Configurations* by NSDC and SEDL, 2003.

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MAIN BUSINESS OFFICE

P.O. Box 240, Oxford, OH 45056
(513) 523-6029
(800) 727-7288
(513) 523-0638 (fax)
E-mail: NSDCoffice@aol.com
Web site: www.nsd.org

Editor: Joan Richardson

Designer: Sue Chevalier

NSDC STAFF

Executive director

Dennis Sparks (SparksNSDC@aol.com)

Deputy executive director

Stephanie Hirsh (NSDCHirsh@aol.com)

Director of publications

Joan Richardson (NSDCJoan@aol.com)

Director of special projects

Joellen Killion (NSDCKillio@aol.com)

Distinguished senior fellow

Hayes Mizell (HMizell@msn.com)

Business manager

Leslie Miller (NSDCLeslie@aol.com)

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New NSDC book to guide standards implementation

NSDC has just published a new book that will help educators translate the NSDC Standards for Staff Development into daily practice.

Moving NSDC's Staff Development Standards into Practice: Innovation Configurations guides educators by providing detailed descriptions of the actions required by each of the 12 standards. This new book features Innovation Configurations for teachers, principals, central office staff members, superintendents, and school board members. (A future edition will address the work of state departments, university personnel, staff developers, technical assistance providers, and professional associations.)

NSDC developed the book in partnership with the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL). The project was spearheaded by Shirley Hord, SEDL scholar emerita, and Patricia Roy, an independent consultant and former NSDC trustee. Both were involved in writing and later revising the standards.

The concept of Innovation Configu-



rations (IC) was first advanced in the 1970s by a research team working on change at a federally funded research center in Austin, Texas. IC maps detail what an innovation (such as the standards) looks like in practice and offer guidance to both educators implementing innovations and those monitoring them.

The ICs in this book will help answer such questions as:

- What do teachers in high-performing learning communities do?
- What do school board members do as members of learning communities?
- What actions do principals take to demonstrate commitment to collaboration?

- What are superintendents committed to data-driven decision making doing?
- How do central office staff members assist schools with the design and delivery of professional development?

The new book is available through the NSDC Online Bookstore at www.nsd.org/bookstore.htm. Look for Item #B221. Price is \$32 for members; \$40 for non-members.

CALENDAR

Feb. 3-4: Innovation Configurations Workshop, Phoenix.

Feb. 9: Deadline for submitting proposals to present at the NSDC Annual Conference in Vancouver, B.C., in Dec. 2004.

Feb. 16: Deadline to submit manuscripts for the Winter 2005 issue of *JSD*. Theme: Moving Standards to Practice. For more information, visit www.nsd.org/jsdthemes.html.

Feb. 28: Deadline to apply for Academy XVI. For more information, visit www.nsd.org/academy.html.

April 1: Deadline for nominations for NSDC Awards.

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Member Services

P.O. Box 240

Oxford, OH 45056

Membership info: (800) 727-7288

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