

# COLLABORATION TAKES CENTER STAGE


**Interactive teaching through a schoolwide focus  
on the performing arts  
leads to dramatic improvements in learning**

**BY JEFF WILLIAMSON AND DIANE ZIMMERMAN**

**C**onsider these learner-centric outcomes that great teachers address before, during, and after a lesson.

While engaged in teaching students, the teacher not only learns a curriculum more completely, he or she moni-

tors student progress, adapts the lesson to student needs, pays attention to the struggling student, analyzes the effectiveness of the learning situation, decides which tools and resources are needed to further learning, designs situations for students to apply new learning, examines student learning modes in use, assesses mastery of standards, and monitors personal practice.



Teaching is so much more about learning than it is about teaching.

In the Old Adobe Union School District in Petaluma, Calif., our goal is to assure that all teachers make the fundamental shift from teacher-centric to learner-centric thinking. For us, this is what distinguishes great teachers from good teachers. We believe this level of expertise takes years to develop and that schools play an important role in assuring that all teachers become expert and that all teachers learn to bring their students to a higher level of understanding.

#### **THE SCHOOL JOURNEY**

Before Principal Jeff Williamson's arrival at Old Adobe Elementary School, the teachers had committed to integrating the visual and performing arts into their curriculum and had purchased a Yamaha music lab. In his first year as principal, Williamson focused his energy on getting the lab running and on helping teachers feel comfortable with this complex technology. Williamson knew that this emphasis on things and activities was not going to get the school where he wanted it to be. He was anxious to start working with teachers in ways that asked them to examine their beliefs about learning. He wanted to interact with teachers to discover areas for growth, analyze limiting condi-

tions, examine resources available for improvement, form and implement a plan for addressing these needs, and monitor this process.

At the same time, the Old Adobe Union School District Board of Trustees asked each school in the district to develop a guiding question that would serve as a focal point for school improvement efforts. Williamson and his staff framed a guiding question that would shift their focus from things and activities to student learning and teacher beliefs that guide their actions. The staff asked, "How can we offer a well-rounded curriculum integrating the visual and performing arts in every classroom, and verify that this benefits students?" Overnight, the emphasis shifted from conducting activities in a technology lab to engaging in deep discussions about performing arts processes and how they could be used to engage the hearts and minds of children. Two years later, we know this singular focus on the arts pushed the teachers and principal to think more deeply about the cognitive demands and complexity of teaching and learning. We call this level of expertise panoramic outcomes, where educators maintain a constant focus on sophisticated outcomes for the learner and the collaborative expertise and shared vision needed to get there.

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**THE POWER OF A CATALYST**

Once the school framed its focus for improvement, Williamson began searching for the right instructor to work side-by-side with teachers. “What I know about teachers is that if they see the value of a new idea in terms of its success in improving student learning, teachers will be more likely to embrace new ideas and put them into practice,” Williamson says. His eureka moment came when he saw teacher Kristina Wenz organize the school talent show. As a drama teacher, she knew how to make each moment count by integrating the arts processes to create meaningful learning activities. She could elicit fabulous responses from kids, adapting as she taught to increase engagement, challenge, and excitement.

She never left an interaction with students without building in success.

Williamson invited Wenz to join him in collaborative planning with his teachers. The format would be simple. Each grade level would identify the content areas that would focus their work with Wenz to draw upon her vast knowledge of the

performing arts and classroom instruction. Wenz served as a catalytic change agent. She facilitated the infusion of the arts into the curriculum and guided the teachers in making this enhanced educational experience their own. For the teachers, this often meant a change in instructional practices. Williamson notes, “I believe the catalytic processes involve reflecting with colleagues, side-by-side teaching, and finally the commitment — articulating student and teacher learning.” (See “Catalytic lesson plan sequence” above.)

As the first teacher to engage in this collaborative process, Kathy Buckley identified 4th-grade social

**CATALYTIC LESSON PLAN SEQUENCE**

Team members include the specialist, Kristina Wenz, and the principal and grade-level team.

1. Grade-level team identifies content/unit focus.
2. Planning meeting: Team collaborates to plan lessons for the next week.
3. For one week, Wenz, as process expert, spends two hours a day in each classroom conducting side-by-side teaching.
4. Team reflection meeting: Review lessons, document new learning, make commitments, and identify other supporting actions.

studies lessons that focused on the geography of California. Wenz helped Buckley plan lessons in which the students would sculpt a giant floor map of California, and then using improvisational techniques, the students would body-sculpt the flora and fauna for each region. Not only did the kids have fun, the teacher found that after the activity, the students conversed knowledgeably about the various regions of California. The experience had exceeded everyone’s expectations and set a standard for future job-embedded learning experiences. Throughout the rest of the year, each grade-level group had a chance to collaborate in this type of team.

From the beginning, it was clear that the framework of the performing arts paired with teacher experts was increasing the cognitive complexity of teacher planning and reflection. We had crossed a threshold. The teachers started to collaborate on their own, and there has been no stopping them.

In the words of Malcolm Gladwell (2000), we had reached a tipping point: the moment when teachers took charge of their own learning.

Professional collaboration has woven its way into our school’s culture. Teachers work together in planning lessons, implementing instruction, reflecting on the results, and improving instruction, working in an ongoing cycle. The teachers have moved beyond fear and worries about how they are perceived as they share ideas and ask questions. Focused professional development and collaboration are built into teachers’ workday, and teachers frequently engage in reflective conversations on improving practice. Everyone at Old Adobe School has become engaged in learning conversations, from the kindergartners, to staff, to parents. The blurring of the line between teachers and learners has created a school where all are leaders in their learning and that of others.

**COGNITIVE COMPLEXITY**

The primary mission of any school is to create engaged, caring, and responsible citizens. This requires that we capture the hearts and minds of our children while raising the cognitive complexity of learning in ways that assure learner success.

Williamson believes that in order to make learning relevant to all learners, teachers must interact with other teachers and with students as they craft lessons. He explains that in effective learning communities, the line between teacher and learner moves, creating new plateaus for understanding. He also asserts that teachers need to be confident and clear about the goals of their work, based on identifying student needs, while at the same time constantly questioning what they do to find ways to move students toward new plateaus of learning. When teachers reflect on practice at this level, they become the

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## STAGES OF LEARNING BASED ON MATURING OUTCOMES

### ACTIVITY

The entry point for inexperienced teachers.

- What do I want to accomplish in this lesson?
- What will I do to make it happen?
- What will my students be doing if they are accomplishing it?

### CONTENT

When paired with activity, content becomes gateway outcome.

- What concepts and skills do students need in place to access deeper learning and demonstrate their learning?
- What situations will we create to foster learning and its application?
- How will students demonstrate content mastery?
- How will teachers give feedback?

### PROCESSES

Tippling point for teachers in the journey from good to great.

- What processes are best for this learning?
- What processes are necessary for each learner?
- How is the learner engaged in these processes?
- How does the learner monitor and express progress throughout these processes?
- How will those involved evaluate processes used?
- How does my school support our collective work in this area?

### DISPOSITIONS

Gaining schoolwide consensus is the tipping point for school leadership.

- What habits or dispositions of

mind will learners use and develop as they become involved in reflective learning?

- How will available resources aid them in developing more powerful habits of mind?
- How will they uncover or express new understandings?
- How will the learner identify next steps and a means to reach them?

### STATES OF MIND

**Emergence: The whole is greater than the sum of the parts.**

**Learners facilitate the learning of others.**

- In which states of mind do we wish all learners to become more resourceful as a result of their learning?
- What has empowered them?
- How will this new empowerment be demonstrated?
- How will learners reflect on their progress and apply new understandings?
- How will we establish and communicate new learning goals?
- How will learners lead in their own growth?

### NEW PLATEAUS

**Learners exceed expectations and are now independent learners.**

- How has the learner's approach to learning situations changed?
- What resources and support are needed to further independent exploration?
- How will learners reflect with others and identify what coaching they need?
- In what ways is feedback articulated and used to establish further empowerment?
- How is this learning shared with others and used to empower others?

(Adapted from work of Costa & Garmston, 1998.)

drivers for the direction professional development and collaboration take.

## MOVING FROM MATURING TO PANORAMIC OUTCOMES

On a visit to the school to learn about this collaboration, Superintendent Diane Zimmerman listened to a teacher and excited students describe what they had learned about the regions of California using drama and improvisation. Zimmerman realized that these teachers and students had embarked on a challenging journey to change the way they think about teaching and learning. The change was palpable, but difficult to put into words. Just two years before, the school was focused on how to use the new music lab in instructional activities. Now everyone was involved in complex conversations about how students learn deeply.

To gain clarity about our journey, we use the work of Costa and Garmston (1998) on maturing outcomes as a lens for our reflection (see “Stages of Learning ...” at left). Zimmerman notes, “Although we did not set out to think about maturing outcomes, we were excited to discover that we could reflect on this work and gain deeper insights using this framework.” Costa and Garmston suggest that as teachers gain experience, their thinking about the outcomes of instruction develops beyond activity and content to higher-order thinking. They divide higher-order thinking into two outcomes — process and disposition or habits of mind. So, activity and content are gateway outcomes for all new teachers. Then, as teachers gain experience, we would hope that their outcome focus would mature and include thinking strategies

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— those from the disciplines and also habits of mind.

As we began to reflect on our work, we found that through focusing on processes and dispositions, teachers made rapid shifts toward complex learner-centric outcomes. The visual and performing arts are process-rich disciplines, and thus the bid to integrate arts into all lessons created a rich forum for process conversations. These conversations integrating process into the lessons became a powerful catalyst for the examination of beliefs about student engagement. Teachers gained more precision in their content outcomes, and as a result, would completely rethink their activities. Now classroom activities were tightly coupled to process or disposition outcomes.

We are finding that when teachers engage in complex planning and reflection, they take control of their own learning while finding ways for students to do the same. The principal has the responsibility to articulate how efforts to teach at the process and disposition levels improve instruction. In addition, the principal reinforces language that supports collective learning and fosters improvements in classroom practices. This is why we are using job-embedded professional development followed by collaborative reflection and planning. To summarize, expert teachers

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### Old Adobe Elementary School

Petaluma, Calif.

Enrollment: 268

Staff: 32

Racial/ethnic mix:

White:	71%
Black:	2%
Hispanic:	16%
Asian/Pacific Islander:	6%
Native American:	1%
Other:	4%

Limited English proficient: 15%

Languages spoken: 8

Free/reduced lunch: 24%

Special education: 6%

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facilitate activities designed to support content that generates integrative processes and fosters productive dispositions about learning. To work as a school to accomplish these ends is the true work of any productive learning community. To frame our conversations on positive expectations, we picked up “panoramic outcomes” from the Costa and Garmston article and believe this term describes our achievement.

### ACHIEVING PANORAMIC OUTCOMES

The cumulative result of the Old Adobe School functioning as a learning community while infusing the classroom curriculum with the arts is evident throughout the school. Examples of increased student learning abound at Old Adobe School. We see evidence in student writing, student presentations and performances,

and students justifying their thinking as a routine part of classroom discussions.

Old Adobe Elementary is lucky to have high-functioning students, and yet we have not achieved the goal of meeting all students’ needs. We are confident that this will happen as a result of our journey and that our most challenged students will begin to love school in the same way as their more advantaged peers.

In 1916, John Dewey stressed the importance of a school becoming an environment where stakeholders interact, learn together, and improve their service to students. Like Dewey, we believe that schools are hungry for clarity in purpose and a single-minded focus on the improvement of learning. At Old Adobe Elementary, we have chosen the arts, a discipline rich in process outcome opportunities. However, all disciplines have process skills that can bring the focus needed to start the journey, and all schools can come to consensus on the enduring dispositions to be modeled in everything that they do.

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