

THE LEADING Teacher

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EVERY EDUCATOR ENGAGES IN EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING EVERY DAY SO EVERY STUDENT ACHIEVES

Build relationships in online communities

"A 21st century model of professional development is inquiry-oriented and builds on teachers' passions and interests as a means of connecting locally and globally for increased student learning. The new model transforms the teacher's traditional network and supports building community offline and online, leveraging emerging technologies in building personal learning networks."

— *Nussbaum-Beach & Ritter Hall, 2011*

By Valerie von Frank

Working in groups face-to-face can be challenging enough for educators long used to working behind closed classroom doors, but virtual communities now offer new opportunities — and greater challenges — as teachers form online learning communities.

Leask and Younie (2001, p. 225) define online communities as "any form of electronic communication which

provides for the opportunity for online synchronous/asynchronous two-way communication between an individual and their peers, and to which the individual has some commitment and professional involvement over a period of time."

Benefits of online communities include a sense of belonging and membership, reduced isolation, learning not limited by time, informality, learning dictated by the learner's needs, a personalized forum that relies on internal rather than external expertise, and "a freshness and variety that traditional communities may not be able to achieve"



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(Duncan-Howell, 2009). Sheryl Nussbaum-Beach and Lani Ritter Hall (2011) state, “Skills such as critical thinking, active learning, problem solving, the development of an on-line voice, and collaborative action research all are fostered through the connected relationships that build over time.”

Educators who form online learning communities for various reasons must build and sustain relationships across computer bandwidths, often without the visual cues and interactions of daily school life. Technology makes it easier than ever before to connect, but collaborating takes more skill.

AEIN Network

In Alaska, for example, where some principals need two days and a plane to reach the central office, university faculty and site-based learning groups have been connecting for a half-dozen years around topics such as language learning.

Patricia Chesbro and Nancy Boxler work with the Alaska Educational Innovations Network as faculty with

the University of Alaska Anchorage. The AEIN began as an effort to connect educators in schools that are separated by distance or other geographical challenges and create conversations facilitated by the university faculty.

“I think it’s a better use of people’s time — though not all the time,” Chesbro said. “But you can have a one-hour meeting, get a lot done, and people can go about their business. I think it’s useful and very cost effective, if people will just get good at it.”

The school staffs use Elluminate software to connect at specified times, allowing Chesbro and Boxler as facilitators to draw a circle on the computer screen showing who is “in the room” and turn on the microphone for a participant to speak.

Chesbro said the online learning allows members to focus on issues and enforce norms of collegial conversation. “The different medium frees us up to behave differently in ways we wish we were behaving face-to-face,” she said.

Online communities create a level playing field without power structures, Chesbro explained. She told the story of a young woman of color, just out of college, participating in an online learning experience with others who had greater experience and grander titles. Chesbro said the woman told her, “People take me seriously because they don’t know what I look like. What I say is valued for what I’m saying, not for what I look like.”

In addition, the lack of visual cues means that online learners are more sensitive to their interactions with other group members, Boxler noted. Participants must listen for verbal cues, pay attention to tone, and wait for a turn to speak.

These factors begin to help in building relationships, but sustaining online communities requires awareness of specific tips, these experts say. Five common themes emerge:

1. Center the work with purpose.

The best-connected learning communities have strong visions and clarity of purpose, Nussbaum-Beach and Ritter Hall write (2011). Boxler and Chesbro said one of a learning community’s earliest, biggest hurdles is finding something that people want to come to. They said defining a purpose for the group is essential.

“Groups that are left to ‘whoever shows up, let’s talk about something’ are not going to be successful,” Chesbro said.

For example, with the language acquisitions network, the group found its purpose in a moral framework around language as identity, Boxler said. “We as a group had to find out why we were coming together,” Boxler said. “It seems pretty simple, but it was complex.”

2. Use a facilitator.

“Facilitation is about connecting people around issues,”

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

ARTICLES

Online community becomes a pathway to teacher leadership
JSD, February 2010

University faculty in the Professional Development Schools (PDS) partnership use web-based tools to encourage teachers to develop leadership capacity.

<http://www.learningforward.org/news/articleDetails.cfm?articleID=2016>

17,000 islands, one goal:
Indonesia turns to online
resources to create a
network of school-based
coaches

JSD, February 2010

An online learning environment brings coaches the skills and networking opportunities they need to provide support to teachers.

<http://www.learningforward.org/news/articleDetails.cfm?articleID=2012>

A state for excellence: New Jersey boosts learning power with online video resources

JSD, October 2011

New Jersey bolsters its professional learning tool kit with Success at the Core, an online resource that offers strategies to improve instruction and strengthen leadership teams.

<http://www.learningforward.org/news/articleDetails.cfm?articleID=2349>



Chesbro said. “You’re not so much driving as evaluating the landscape and bringing to light the themes.”

For online communities, the facilitator must work hard to ensure the group is discussing and inquiring about a topic important to members. “Otherwise,” Chesbro said, “they’re not going to come anymore.” The facilitator’s role is to elicit from the group the pieces of work that will engage members.

Facilitators also must be sure that all voices are being heard. “If you didn’t have a facilitator trying to bring all the voices in, you wouldn’t hear all the voices,” Boxler said. “Face-to-face, it happens all the time (that some voices are not heard). We resort to old patterns.”

Facilitators also make sure that members are present beyond simply being online, a crucial role when participants can’t see one another.

“The thing you always have to remember is that when they’re not talking, they could be walking around the countryside with a glass of wine, so you really want to have the discussion be engaging,” Chesbro said.

Chesbro and Boxler suggest facilitators:

- Be patient and listen for themes to emerge in the discussion;
- Be part of the discussion;
- Remain learners, guarding against seeing oneself as teacher or expert;
- Focus on a logic model to create intentional change.

Finally, Boxler and Chesbro said, online work generally requires two facilitators so that one person can assist with technology issues while the other focuses on the conversation, or one can maintain the dialogue while the other monitors the chat room to make sure that no questions are missed.

3. Encourage diversity.

Nussbaum-Beach and Ritter Hall write, “It is almost impossible to have something new emerge from people who hang out together all the time and think about the same things in much the same ways.”

Dialogue is a powerful means of professional learning, Chesbro and Boxler emphasized, and technology enables live discussions with a broader group not bounded by physical presence. Having different voices at the table enhances that dialogue, they said, but garnering that diversity of opinion requires a little flexibility.

They said having different voices in the group at different times creates different dynamics that can be beneficial over time.

“We’ve learned we have to stay open” to participants, Boxler said. “You have people that sometimes come or don’t come.” The facilitator helps invite people into the conversation, keeps the line open to those who have been absent, and keeps members informed when they miss a session.

TEAM TOOLS

www.learningforward.org/teamtools

With each issue of *The Leading Teacher*, Learning Forward provides free sample tools from our books, newsletters, and magazines. Selections for this issue:

• **Building Global Competence**
Tools For Schools, May/June 2010

Teams can use this tool to guide conversations about ways to bring the world into their classrooms and schools.

• **Let’s Get Acquainted**
Tools For Schools, May/June 2007

This tool can assist team members to get to know one another and help build relationships.

• **Trust Factors**
Teachers Teaching Teachers, October 2009

This assessment tool can help teams gather information about factors that increase trust in groups.

• **Get Connected with Today’s Tools**
Tools for Schools, May/June 2009

Teams can use this tool to increase their knowledge of digital tools that are useful for their professional learning as well as for relationship building.



4. Build trust.

“The success of a connected learning community is built on members’ willingness to create a trust-based community — to share, laugh, celebrate, push, and empathize with each other,” Nussbaum-Beach and Ritter Hall write (2011).

Sobero (2008) says trust is created by:

- Developing relationships;
- Identifying with the mission of the community and with the other members;
- Generating feelings of belonging and mutual respect;
- Openly sharing learning while building on knowledge about the practice, co-contributing to build content;
- Developing community norms that encourage truthfulness, openness, routine collaboration, and the ability to address difficult issues or conflict.

Putting that into practice, Boxler and Chesbro said, generally requires protocols. They said they use a motivational framework from Raymond Wlodkowski and Margery Ginsberg (1995) that includes four elements: ensuring that all voices are included; developing shared meaning; respecting others and having a positive attitude; and engendering

competence so that all are learning together.

“Trust isn’t something you can say, ‘I’m going to work on trust right now with an icebreaker or a protocol,’ ” Boxler said. “That helps develop trust. But real trust comes when people are engaged in working around their everyday challenges, successes, and real work. . . . People develop trust by doing real work. So if we can create the conditions for people to share and do their work together, trust will come.”

5. Focus on relationships.

Nussbaum-Beach and Ritter Hall write that online collegial relationships require members to share ideas and challenge one another’s thinking. They say members should begin each gathering by sharing some personal information and encourage participants to be transparent. They also suggest regular celebrations of participants’ news and accomplishments.

“Celebration of and for each other is an important component in connected learning communities,” they write. “Community leaders, both in online and offline spaces, need to develop protocols for identifying and sharing good news.”

Chesbro and Boxler said supplementing online meetings with some face-to-face learning benefits the group, and noted that the online, nonvisual connection already established helped build the foundation of the relationships. “When (the learning groups) got together, they really knew each other based on their beliefs, their philosophy of education, their experiences, and their identity,” Boxler said.

The power of online communities

Online communities are helping more educators advance their learning. “With online communities, Boxler said, “theory and practice are sitting right next to each other to create new knowledge.”

A study by Duncan-Howell (2009) found that teachers were more likely to use what they learn online because the knowledge was more directly related to their daily practice since online communities tend to be formed around their specific needs.

The technologically literate teaching communities have another benefit, as well, writes Jacqueline Kennedy,

“People develop trust by doing real work. So if we can create the conditions for people to share and do their work together, trust will come.”

— Nancy Boxler

Learning Forward’s associate director of strategic initiatives (2011): “Educators can continue to model and mimic the same innovative learning expectations we have for students, thus becoming 21st-century educators that serve 21st-century students.”

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Learning Forward BELIEF

Schools’ most complex problems are best solved by educators collaborating and learning together.

Task force charge statement

Help build strong relationships within your group by clarifying the group's purpose, expectations, timelines, and responsibilities. Use the guidelines below and on p. 6 to complete the worksheet on pp. 7-8.

1. PURPOSE/OBJECTIVES

The reason the group is forming. What the group is to accomplish.

EXAMPLES:

- To make a recommendation concerning a school schedule that would support frequent use of job-embedded professional learning strategies.
- To study what other schools and districts have done to craft time for job-embedded professional learning.
- To become expert in how to provide time to support job-embedded professional learning.

2. LEVEL OF AUTHORITY

The extent to which the group can make and/or implement decisions without others' approval.

EXAMPLES:

- The task force has the authority to act only with the prior approval of the principal, superintendent, or school board.
- The task force has the authority to make a recommendation to the school's stakeholders and make adjustments/refinements based on that feedback.
- The group has complete authority to decide and implement the recommendations but must inform the principal.

3. COMMUNICATION LINKAGES:

Who needs to be kept informed, in what form, and how often.

EXAMPLES:

- Feedback sessions are held with stakeholders (teachers, parents, central office staff, community members) when a recommendation has been formed.
- Monthly updates are given at staff meetings.
- Written updates are provided to the School Improvement Team.

Source: Adapted from Killion, J. & Roy, P. (2009). *Becoming a learning school*. Oxford, OH: NSDC.

4. TIME REQUIREMENT

Expectations for amount of meeting time.

EXAMPLES

- Task force meets weekly for two hours until task is completed.
- Task force meets 2.5 hours each month on a schedule of members' choice.

5. RESOURCES AVAILABLE

Amount of money, time, and materials for the group to use with or without prior approval.

EXAMPLES

- Each task force member receives an hourly stipend for time spent outside the regular workday.
- Access to the Internet, printing costs, and meeting refreshments are provided from the professional development budget.
- Secretarial support is provided for creating monthly updates, recommendations, and compiling stakeholder feedback.

6. MEMBERSHIP REQUIREMENTS

Who needs to participate, how membership in groups will be decided.

EXAMPLES

- Representatives will be included from each grade level or department.
- Parent representative(s) will be included.
- Central office staff member(s) will be included.
- School administrator(s) will be included.
- Students will be included (when appropriate).

7. ACCOUNTABILITY/EXPECTATIONS

Results, impact, accomplishments.

EXAMPLES

- A recommendation will be made for a new monthly schedule which supports the use of job-embedded professional learning and does not violate district or state policy.
- The task force will make a report to the school board that includes recommendations, rationale, feedback received, adjustments made, and a plan for collecting information concerning the effectiveness of a new schedule.
- The task force will present to the faculty three possible schedules with the benefits and concerns identified for each proposal.

Worksheet

FOR TASK FORCE CHARGE STATEMENT

1. PURPOSE/OBJECTIVES

The reason the group is forming, what the group is to accomplish.

2. LEVEL OF AUTHORITY

The extent to which the group can make and/or implement decisions without others' approval.

3. COMMUNICATION LINKAGES

Who will need to be kept informed, in what form, and how often.

TOOL

4. TIME REQUIREMENT

The expectations for the amount of meeting time.

5. RESOURCES AVAILABLE

Money, time, and materials for the group to use with or without prior approval.

6. MEMBERSHIP REQUIREMENTS

Who needs to participate and how membership in groups will be decided.

7. ACCOUNTABILITY/EXPECTATIONS

Results, impact, accomplishments.



What 5th-grade campers can show learning communities

We all could learn something from attending a wilderness camp. After spending a few days with fifth graders at an outdoor education camp, I was reminded how easily students embrace the power of learning in communities even as they experience new and awkward learning. As we moved through each instructional period, I could see the three core elements of the Learning Community standard unfold: engage in continuous improvement, develop collective responsibility, and create alignment and accountability.

Engage in continuous improvements

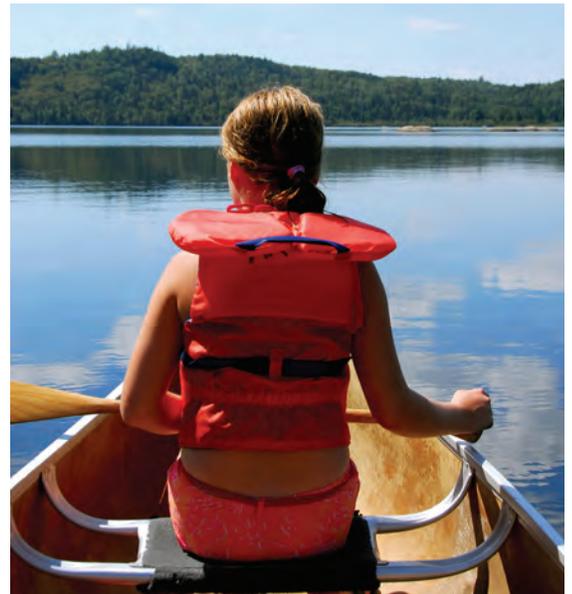
While most students had no experience with archery, they were eager, as students typically are, to learn how to do something that appeared to be complex. With open minds, they listened as the basic steps of archery were described and modeled. They approached the line with their target in sight, released their bow, and looked to their peers and counselor for guidance. The students were always willing to gather data about their performance from their peers, revise or implement new techniques, and start the cycle of improvement over again to improve their skills. Camp counselors, who were available to review and demonstrate specific skills, supported ongoing learning for students.

Like camp counselors, teacher leaders have the opportunity to

develop teachers' capacity to use the cycle of continuous improvement. Meeting regularly and frequently to support ongoing inquiry, analysis, and evaluation of practice, teacher leaders can help their peers remain focused on their learning and the learning of their students. The first step is to assist and facilitate the process of continuous improvement by guiding teachers to determine their learning needs based on the needs of students, and then select and implement the necessary strategies to achieve the desired learning goals. Follow through with the process by facilitating learning, supporting the application of new skills, and evaluating the results.

Developing collective responsibility

After an introduction to canoe-paddling basics, followed by a few safety tips and much life jacket fastening, students were allowed to explore everything that canoeing had to offer. They soon made a big discovery about collective responsibility. Early on, communication levels were low and goals were misaligned — many students were not talking and clearly wanted to do their own thing. Within minutes of aimlessly paddling along the shoreline or incessantly circling the middle of the pond, they started talking to one another. They learned that they each shared responsibility in reaching their intended outcomes. Students demonstrated positive interdependence when they became aware that a lone paddler, no matter



how strong his or her skills, could not succeed unless the entire group in the canoe succeeded.

Similarly, educator efforts are strengthened when they can unite around a common goal. In a collaborative culture, with the added support of a teacher leader, teachers can acquire and practice the collaboration and feedback skills necessary to advance the goals of the team through meaningful and focused conversations. Additionally, teachers can engage in open discussion to make and implement decisions related to professional learning, and hold their peers accountable for student results.

Create alignment and accountability

While most students had never

done anything similar to geocaching, an outdoor treasure hunting game using a GPS-enabled device, they were fascinated by the idea. They watched the opening instructional video and, equipped with GPS units and logbooks, set off in search of as many “geocaches” (waterproof lock boxes) as possible using the geographical coordinates of the lock boxes. Students immediately discovered the need to align their varied goals, interests, and strategies. With team cohesion, cooperation, and communication working to their advantage, they set clear goals and agreed to hold one another accountable for staying to-

gether, remaining on task, and solving problems. The students moved much more quickly and began to feel a sense of accomplishment as they found each lock box. Everyone worked together to answer the applicable questions, determine the clue, and open the lock box.

Similarly, to avoid fragmented approaches, teacher leaders might first work with teams and teachers to align individual goals with team and school goals, then work to establish clear accountability measures and tools, and finally, monitor and provide ongoing support towards goals.

Like campers in the wilderness, educators are faced with many chal-

lenges and obstacles that can create barriers to success. Professional learning that uses the cycle of continuous improvement, frequent collaboration, and a culture of accountability for the success of all educators and students creates a community that is empowered to overcome these challenges. This is learning that helps us survive and thrive in the wilderness of teaching and learning.

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Toilet paper and pennies kick off communication and reflection

As told to Valerie von Frank

In Duval County (Fla.) Public Schools, we use a districtwide, eight-week coaching cycle. We use lesson study, where teachers create a shared lesson and go into a classroom to watch one teacher demonstrate it. The observers use a note-taking guide that we plan together. Then we debrief and tweak the lesson before they all teach it. Afterward, they come back together to reflect and examine student work. Each district coach is assigned two specific schools to work with one day a week. In addition, we provide districtwide professional development.

When I work with a school staff, I always begin with icebreakers. I have three favorites. I pass around a roll of bathroom tissue and ask each person to take as many squares as needed for the whole day. That gets everyone laughing. Then, I ask each person to tear off one square and share

something about themselves, either personal or professional. We do that for each square. When the exercise is completed, I know who they are and they all know more about each other.

Another icebreaker I use is to have each person pull out a penny, look at the date on it, and share something that happened to them that year. For some younger teachers, it can be amazing to hear what happened before they were born. Also, I sometimes ask: If you were a household appliance, which would you be and why?

At schools, I often find teachers do not take time to talk to each other. The icebreakers get teachers communicating with each other, which makes it easier to jump into the work, look at the data, analyze data, and come up with solutions and strategies to help students.

After the icebreaker, teachers and the coach review student assessment data to determine a focus for the lesson study. Teachers decide on student

and teacher learning goals and develop up to four lessons over the eight-week cycle. Each lesson starts with pre-conference in the morning, followed by a teacher demonstrating the lesson in a host classroom. The other teachers observe and take notes. We debrief, examine student work, and tweak the lesson before having all teachers use the lesson in their classrooms.

To coach effectively, it is important to develop the atmosphere that we are all in this together and keep the focus on the process. Cognitive coaching skills, such as paraphrasing and collaborative dialogue, are helpful in working with teachers and fellow coaches.

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