

# Tools *for* LEARNING SCHOOLS

LEARNING FORWARD'S VISION: EXCELLENT TEACHING AND LEARNING EVERY DAY

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## CONNECTED CLASSROOMS

*Teacher teams use protocols to observe and improve practice*

**By Danielle Birdyshaw, Elizabeth Lietz, Diana Stotler, and Mary Turchi**

**A**n island can be a lonely place, especially when it's inhabited by just one person. A classroom can feel just as isolating when the only adult in the room is one teacher on constant watch over waves of students. In today's world of college- and career-ready standards, high-stakes tests, and evaluations, solitary teachers need other adults to serve as lifelines between classrooms.

Novi Community School District in Novi, Michigan, builds these bridges between teachers by using learning lab observation teams, which enable teachers to observe others teaching, reflect on practice, and take valuable instruction back to individual classrooms.

Novi began this process in 2010, when literacy coach Nick Kalakailo, inspired by Japanese lesson study and the work of Malcolm Knowles, had an idea for enhancing teacher collaboration. Knowles' research concluded that adults are most interested in learning subjects that have immediate relevance to their jobs or personal life and that adult learning should

be problem-centered instead of content-centered (Knowles, 2011). Kalakailo was "hoping this would lead to group coaching around our observations. If a teacher hears another colleague working through a problem, the likelihood of that teacher making some similar instructional changes in his or her classroom was higher." He hoped these structured protocols would "allow teachers to think about problems of their practice in a new way."

Kalakailo envisioned an opportunity for teachers to gather, observe, and reflect on classroom practices. He planned a formal structure in which a facilitator leads a group through established protocols that encourage objective observation and insightful reflection with the intention that observers transfer effective practices into their own classrooms. The protocols include a preobservation meeting, a classroom observation, and a postobservation debrief.

These collaborative teams, typically consisting of five to eight teachers, soon became known as learning lab observation teams. In Novi, the district's instructional coaching staff facilitates the observation teams and also participates in county-level "lab on lab" observations where they ob-

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serve protocols used by other districts. After each Novi or county-level lab observation, coaches reflect upon what has gone successfully and what could be improved. Facilitators use evidence of participant learning to measure success. As a result, the coaches modified Novi's protocols for a more coherent K-12 experience. Each coach had input on the design of the planning and recording forms.

Beginning in 2011, secondary English and science teachers were the first learning lab participants. Based on positive feedback, the following year the district formed additional teams in 1st, 4th, and 5th grades. As of the 2013-14 school year, observation teams include teachers in all core content areas as well as ancillary staff. District administrators are also participating in a similar process of instructional rounds. To date, more than 150 teachers have participated in the learning lab experience.

Participant feedback validates Novi Community Schools' decision to implement the learning lab observation team model. One participant said, "The learning lab teams are of tremendous value both professionally and personally. The [other] participants I have spoken with feel the same. We have been able to have candid and frank conversations about the content as well as our own teaching practices."

### **PLOTTING THE COURSE: STRUCTURES AND PROCESSES**

**Build a team.** Novi has formed observation teams that have a common content or instructional focus. The first thing to consider when forming learning labs is organizing observers and hosts. This process has differed over time and across grade levels. While secondary administrators expect core content-area teachers to participate, at the elementary level, teachers join voluntarily.

**Identify a host.** Other organizations conduct peer observation groups using the "model classroom" format where peers observe a model or "expert" teacher multiple times. From its inception, Novi has maintained that all teachers are models and learners. Therefore, different teachers volun-

teer to host each round. Additionally, facilitators strive to ensure that hosts are from different buildings or grade levels so team members get a varied, districtwide instructional perspective. Given the insular nature of teaching, many teachers are reluctant to be observed by their peers. Facilitators encourage potential hosts by praising their instructional strengths or acknowledging special curricular knowledge, thus identifying potential benefit for observers.

**Schedule an observation.** Once Novi builds a team and establishes a host, observation scheduling begins. Coor-

inating a date and time that works for all members of the learning lab observation team can be challenging and may take more than one attempt. Currently, observations take 2½ hours. Moving forward, scheduling complications and a desire for more collaborative time have led Novi's facilitators to pilot a few full-day sessions.

Another consideration is finding a physical space for the team to meet. Pre- and post- components of the sessions are held in conference rooms, available classrooms, and even staff lounges. Regardless of the location, having materials for sharing and recording participants' thoughts is a vital component to teacher reflection. To accomplish this, groups typically use a computer with a projector to document their work; at times, due to technological limitations, facilitators also use chart paper and markers. No matter how notes are recorded, facilitators share written notes with everyone on the team.

### **SETTING SAIL: PLANNING AND CONDUCTING OBSERVATIONS**

**Meet with the host.** After scheduling is complete, the facilitator meets with the host teacher in the week before the observation to get an overview of the planned lesson. During the preobservation host meeting, the facilitator asks the host predetermined questions to help inform the observation. For example, facilitators may ask about lesson focus, classroom structures, and instructional routines. The preobservation host meeting gives the facilitator the requisite background to inform the team about the upcoming lesson if the host is unable to attend any portion of the preobservation period.

This meeting also gives the host an overview of the session, supports him or her in planning, and allows him or her to practice speaking about the observation lesson. Sometimes the facilitator may observe the host teacher before the group observation in an effort to gain additional context for the team. Following the host meeting, the facilitator emails the team to remind them of the upcoming observation.

**Establish context with a preobservation conversation.** Observation day includes three segments: the preobservation meeting, the classroom observation, and the postobservation debrief. The preobservation meeting begins with the facilitator identifying observation norms, which include being silent and recording objective notes or questions. Then, the host teacher shares the context and expected outcomes of the lesson. Before observers set individual goals, the host selects one or two target areas for which he or she would like to receive feedback from the observers. Observers determine at least one area on which to focus during the observation, e.g. instructional language. The facilitator captures and records participants' thoughts

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#### **Learning Forward BELIEF**

More students achieve when educators assume collective responsibility for student learning.

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throughout the conversation.

Time permitting, facilitators may share scholarly articles or lesson- or assessment-related materials. With recent changes in education legislation, some facilitators include discussion time around the connection between learning lab and teacher evaluation. The preobservation meeting concludes with participants selecting recording instruments. Facilitators provide paper, clipboards, and numerous copies of the district's student/teacher observation document.

**Observe instruction.** Team members transition to the classroom, observe a lesson or period, and record what they see teachers and students saying and doing. Typical observations run anywhere from 45 to 60 minutes. Because of the potential interference with the process, observers are discouraged from interacting with the host teacher during the observation. Observer-student interaction may occur during independent work time but should be limited to gauging student understanding of content and intended outcomes. In the most successful observations, team members honor the established norms. During the observation, facilitators also take copious notes, being mindful to note the duration of and transitions between lesson components.

**Debrief the classroom observation.** At the conclusion of the lesson, participants return to the meeting space and debrief. First, observers make a comprehensive list of behaviors they saw and heard in the classroom. It is important that observers reserve judgment throughout the postobservation meeting. If teachers use phrases such as "I liked the way you ...," the facilitator intentionally rephrases the statement to be purely objective. The list generated during this portion of the debrief serves as an anchor for the remainder of the session.

In the next step of the postobservation protocol, teachers make inferences about what they observed. Ideally, comments focus on the pedagogical values held by the host and his or her students. Probing for inferences, facilitators ask questions like, "Based on what you saw, what do you believe students in this classroom value?" The facilitator helps observers make strong connections between inferences and evidence. When a participant shares an inference, the facilitator asks a question like, "How do you know? What did you see or hear that leads you to believe this?" This probing helps observers ground their inferences in actual classroom practice.

During the naming and noticing portion of the protocol, hosts are usually present but do not contribute or address questions. Observers are able to question the host teacher later in the debriefing. Hosts appreciate a chance to hear what others see in their classrooms. One host remarked that she tends to "forget about some of the structures I've set up — to hear other people talk about it, it reminded me of these structures. It was a nice experience that was helpful

and made me reflect — I appreciated it."

Facilitators may choose to have the host reflect before the naming and noticing. Otherwise, immediately following these steps, the host reflects on his or her perception of the day's lesson and comments on whether he or she achieved the intended aims.

Observers are then asked to declare a "takeaway" — something they saw that they want to try in their own classrooms. For example, a middle school chemistry teacher saw a high school host use a note-taking procedure that he now uses in his instruction.

As the final step of the debriefing protocol, each observer gives kudos to the host. This affective piece honors the host for the gift of opening his or her classroom for collegial observation. An observer commented to one host, "Thanks for being brave and letting us come to see you. ... It made me really think about our delivery and our program and how we can improve. So much better than a video, reading a book, or someone telling you how to do it the right way."

The facilitator closes the learning lab observation session with pertinent information including dates for future sessions, specifics on professional development hours earned, and a commitment to send session notes in a timely manner.

## CRUISING FULL-SPEED AHEAD

Together, the observation protocols allow teachers to step out of their traditional, insular roles and become a community of reflective practitioners.

This type of feedback validates Novi Community Schools' decision to continue the learning lab observation team model. Though the winds of change may be variable, Novi has discovered that fostering teacher collaboration through learning lab observation teams builds bridges between islands — one classroom at a time.

## REFERENCE

**Knowles, M. (2001).** *The adult learner*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Elsevier.

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### Novi Community Schools Novi, Michigan

Number of schools: 8

Enrollment: 6,377

Staff: 450 instructional staff

Racial/ethnic mix:

White: 50%

Black: 9%

Hispanic: 3%

Asian/Pacific Islander: 38.2%

Native American: .08 %

Other: 0%

Limited English proficient: 13.3%

Languages spoken: 60

Free/reduced lunch: 7.4%

Special education: 9%

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