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**P**rofessional learning communities have long been considered a powerful form of collaborative professional learning, as the Learning Communities standard in Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning attests (Learning Forward, 2011). This focus on communities can engage teachers in ongoing professional dialogue and examination of student work as members learn with and from each other over time. Mounting evidence shows that professional learning communities impact both teacher practice and student learning outcomes (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008).

However, what is less examined in both the theory and practice behind professional learning communities is how individual teachers learn within these collaborative groups, especially when one critical definitional aspect of professional learning communities is a shared vision and mission.

Just as educators differentiate learning for diverse students in their classrooms, they must also remember that professional learning communities consist of individuals who need different things in order to learn and who may be at drastically different places in their careers or their teaching capabilities. To maximize the potential impact

of professional learning communities for teachers' professional development, educators need to maintain a simultaneous focus on both collective and individual learning.

#### INDIVIDUAL LEARNING TRAJECTORIES

Some interesting research about the use of professional learning communities in higher education faculty groups highlights the interplay of individual and collective learning. Hadar and Brody (2013) outline four stages of group learning processes: breaking isolation, talking about student learning, improving teaching, and professional growth.

Using a year of interviews and observations, they mapped individual learning trajectories onto the larger group learning process and found four stages of individual growth. Individuals often begin at the stage of anticipation/curiosity, then experience withdrawal/resistance, characterized by defensive or resistant feelings as they question their own practice or current understandings.

Some move beyond that stage to experience the stages of awareness and then dispositional change. Progression through these individual stages occurs at different paces, but the study authors made some important connections to group processes that helped individuals move forward. Interestingly, the key to engagement of individuals beyond the withdrawal stage was the group process of talking about



student learning. And the key to moving individuals beyond awareness was the group process of improving teaching.

Individuals at the withdrawal stage show resistance to adopting new practices and complacency with their current practice. These individuals may feel defensive and protective, unwilling to engage in significant learning. What seems to move these withdrawn learners toward awareness is conversation around students, rather than a focus on themselves as teachers. Individuals who move to the awareness level can push their learning further with a subsequent group focus on improvement of teaching.

So, what does this all mean for the average professional learning community operating in a pre-K-12 setting? Here are three solutions that can improve individual learning within collaborative groups.

## **1 CONNECT TO STUDENT LEARNING IN EACH TEACHER'S CLASSROOM.**

Hadar and Brody's (2013) findings confirm that a focus on student learning is one of the most powerful dimensions of a learning community. Teachers need to be able to connect their learning within community to individual learners back in their own classrooms.

Bringing student work for collaborative analysis is one way that individuals can do this. The National School Reform

## **COLLABORATIVE ASSESSMENT CONFERENCE**

### **Step 6: Discuss implications for teaching and learning.**

The facilitator invites everyone (participants and presenting teacher) to share any thoughts they have about their own teaching, children's learning, or ways to support this particular child in future instruction.

**Source:** National School Reform Faculty, [www.nsrffharmony.org/system/files/protocols/cac\\_0.pdf](http://www.nsrffharmony.org/system/files/protocols/cac_0.pdf).

Faculty (<http://nsrffharmony.org>) has numerous protocols for collaborative examination of student work through structured dialogue. However, when one teacher presents her student work in a group, the danger is that other professional learning community members may be focusing so much on how to support that teacher that they may not always make the connection to their own classrooms.

Skilled facilitators can use these opportunities to help other individuals connect the group discussion back to their own students, unearthing implications for their own teaching and their own contexts. Most well-designed National School Reform Faculty protocols have an explicit step designed to do this (see box above), but time limitations for professional learning community collaboration may cut these conversations short since they

often occur at the end of a protocol.

It is through these conversations about implications that teachers remind each other to think about individual students. In our work with schools, we've seen some professional learning community members focus so hard on helping the presenting teacher and his or her students that the type of critical reflection necessary to internalize connections to one's own practice does not occur.

Ultimately, the goal is to ensure that even the professional learning community members who are not presenting their own student work can make connections back to their own students.

## 2 FOLLOW UP ON IMPROVEMENT IN TEACHING AS A RESULT OF GROUP LEARNING.

If professional learning communities are to help individuals move beyond awareness into deeper professional growth, the learning that occurs must extend beyond the physical setting of the professional learning community and back into classrooms, where changes in practice can be examined.

Most educators enjoy a rigorous conversation about teaching and learning, but if the conversation stays within the confines of the meeting room, then individual knowledge may increase, but teacher practice may not change.

Although professional learning communities are powerful, they can be even more powerful when combined

with lesson study, coaching, or instructional rounds that occur in classrooms with students. These collaborative learning structures focus more directly on teaching moves, but must be combined with powerful conversations about the observed teaching practices.

In lesson study, this reflective dialogue occurs after the group observation during lesson debriefing, and in instructional coaching, it happens during a coaching conversation using observation data. When coaching is used as a follow-up to deepen concepts learned in collaborative professional development, teachers can see how their new knowledge and skills play out in the classroom. One elementary teacher we work with noted the value of learning about engaging students in her professional learning community, followed up with coaching and data collection on student engagement. The teacher brought the results back to the group, and they discussed next steps. As this illustration suggests, it is essential to connect teaching strategies and practices back to the kinds of deep conversations that can occur during professional learning community meetings.

### SAMPLE GROUP NORMS

- Acknowledge each other as equals.
- Speak from your heart.
- Get what you need.
- Assume good will.
- Trust the process.
- Expect it to be messy at times.
- Respect confidentiality when requested.

## 3 IMPROVE NORMS AND PROCESSES THAT FOSTER DIVERSITY OF THOUGHT.

One simple yet often overlooked strategy to improve individual learning within collective groups is to set group norms that recognize and appreciate the diversity of thought within groups. Individuals need to feel safe enough to voice dissent and push back in order to clarify understanding or unearth assumptions underlying conversation.

The box at left has a list of sample norms that professional learning community members can discuss, modify, and then establish. It is important to revisit these norms frequently to make modifications if the norms are not creating conditions for a strong learning environment for members. The key is that the norms continually guide the work that professional learning community members engage in on a regular basis.

In addition to norms, groups need structures and processes that not only allow all voices to be heard, but also to find ways for those voices to enter the conversation where they are, even if that is in conflict with the majority of the group. For groups to foster individual learning, it has to be okay for individuals to push back. One highly successful strategy is a protocol called Yeah, But ... (see p. 30).

This activity takes place after a group learns about or discusses a new teaching strategy or school reform approach. In this protocol, all group members are asked to play devil's advocate and think about how their most resistant colleague might react to what the group just discussed.

Using the sentence stem, "Yeah, but ...," each participant completes the sentence with an example of resistance. For instance, after professional learning that introduced inquiry to a school group, one teacher said: "Yeah, but is someone going to mandate the inquiry topic I have to study?" This question, which the facilitator did not anticipate, created space for a deeper discussion on a topic that might not have been safe for individual teachers to voice otherwise.

Participants put each sentence on a sticky note (anonymously) and place the sticky note on chart paper. Group members sort and categorize the sticky notes before engaging in a discussion of anticipated resistance.

By making the posts anonymous, participants are able to voice concerns they may have under the guise of using a resistant colleague's voice instead of their own. This allows individual teachers to push back and deepens the conversation instead of painting an overly rosy, compliant tone. It also helps group members see where learners at other levels may be operating, whether those learners are in the group or in the larger school setting.

### FROM RHETORIC TO REALITY

Although the three solutions outlined here oversimplify the complexity of individual learning within collaborative groups, they are actions that any professional learning community

## PROTOCOL FOR “YEAH, BUT ...” ACTIVITY

This protocol works well after the presentation or discussion of an idea or reform concept that is likely to meet some resistance. It allows professional learning community members to voice ideas of resistance in an anonymous way by assuming a devil’s advocate role.

- **Materials:** Sticky notes, chart paper, and markers.
- **Time:** 20-45 minutes, depending on depth of discussion.
- **Ideal group size:** 8-10.



### STEPS

Group members are asked to play devil’s advocate and think about how their most resistant colleague might react to what they just discussed. Due to potential controversial opinions about to be voiced, remind the group about norms that respect confidentiality and equality of voice and opinion.

Using the sentence stem “**Yeah, but ...**,” each participant completes the sentence with an example of resistance. Each sentence is put on a sticky note (anonymously) and placed on chart paper. Participants can contribute more than one idea, but each one should be on a separate sticky note. **(8-10 minutes)**

When everyone has finished, the group gathers around the chart to read and think about general themes emerging across responses. Group members sort and categorize the sticky notes, using markers to label the theme/categories. **(5-8 minutes)**

If multiple groups created their own charts, do a short gallery walk so groups can see each other’s charts. **(2 minutes)**

Facilitator leads a group discussion of anticipated resistance to clarify and extend the conversation. **(10 minutes; add more time if the issue discussed was very complex)**

should be able to take.

If educators hope to achieve the potential of learning communities, they need to recognize that communities are comprised of a collective of individual learners who might want to be on the same page, but rarely are. By helping individual teachers connect group analysis of student work back to their own classrooms, and by opening up classroom practice to public conversation and analysis, groups can deepen and broaden learning for all members.

The concept that all students can learn applies to adults, too. To achieve this in professional learning communities, educators need to understand and accept where each individual is in his or her professional growth trajectory.

### REFERENCES

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