



# CREATIVE TENSION

TURN THE CHALLENGES OF LEARNING TOGETHER INTO OPPORTUNITIES

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**E**ffective and authentic communities of practice in schools have the potential to support teachers in improving their instructional practices around perennial challenges, such as improving the literacy skills of all students. But before they can achieve such goals, communities of practice take time to build, effort to sustain, and ongoing support to spread their work.

Because a strong community of practice is often situated within a broader department or school context, an ecosystem within an ecosystem, nurturing that community requires a delicate balance of supports and structures if it is going to lead to real instructional change.

Our work in an ongoing disciplinary literacy professional learning initiative has taught us that the formation of communities of practice for teachers relies on finding

the right balance of elements that both support such communities and also free teachers to pursue authentic work related to their own classrooms.

While this just-right balance is often built through trial and error, and necessarily changes over time, it is an essential element of a productive community of practice. Moreover, we believe that there are several broad tensions that could be instructive to new communities of practice as they design their own professional learning trajectories.

These communities of practice were formed as part of the Content-area Reading Initiative at Brookline High School in Brookline, Massachusetts, a large and diverse comprehensive high school. Brookline High School has more than 140 teachers, who serve over 1,700 students representing 76 nations and speaking 57 languages. Roughly a third of students are English language learners, and a growing number of students receive free or reduced



lunch or special education services.

The Content-area Reading Initiative, designed partly in response to shifting student demographics, is a four-year project using teacher professional learning communities to improve students' literacy skills in various secondary content areas. The initiative relied on a variety of structural supports and components to form and support departmental and cross-departmental communities of practice focused on literacy teaching and learning.

For the teacher teams involved, finding the right balance between complex factors in the broader school and modifying traditional ways of engaging in professional development made all the difference in spurring changes in teacher practice and student learning. Yet arriving at those changes was not easy or straightforward.

Here are some of the key tensions that emerged throughout the project and that members of communities of practice navigated to work and learn together effectively. While we caution that not all communities of practice will encounter these same tensions, we believe that considering the various factors that shaped particular communities of practice work within a particular ecosystem can help others consider the tensions that might arise in their context.

### DEFINING COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

We define communities of practice using Wenger's (1998) work. He describes a community of practice as a community of individuals mutually engaged in a joint enterprise that will lead to repertoires of resources and tools that can be used by its participants (Wenger, 1998). These

### THE BENEFITS OF COLLECTIVE LEARNING

**F**or teachers in the Content-area Reading Initiative, weekly work in disciplinary teams — which developed into communities of practice — was the key component that supported shared learning over the course of the initiative. For them, this is where the nitty-gritty, as some put it, of their learning and improvement took place.

For instance, the science team came together to figure out how to help students gain more facility reading and interpreting diagrams in science texts. Similarly, the math team worked collectively to find and frame readings that could be integrated into mathematics lessons. The success of these development processes was clearly dependent on the group as a whole.

Across different disciplinary teams, teachers spoke of the “wisdom” gained from colleagues and about how “the sum of everybody is greater than its parts.” In reflecting on the growth and learning that emerged from the disciplinary communities of practice, one teacher captured the benefits of this collective learning process: “Wise colleagues focused consistently on literacy. It shouldn't be rare, but it is!”

communities are often marked by high levels of engagement around a goal developed and shared by teachers.

In the Content-area Reading Initiative, participants grappled with and attempted new instructional practices designed to improve students' literacy skills over time. Without regular opportunities to interact around the work of improving literacy, teachers might have found ideas for improving literacy instruction in their individual classrooms, but they might not have come to agreement on new, shared instructional routines. Moreover, the strength of the collective work allowed the teams to then spread their practices to colleagues outside the project.

### PROJECT CONTEXT

As we have written about before in *JSD* and elsewhere (Ippolito, Dobbs, & Charner-Laird, 2014; Dobbs, Ippolito, & Charner-Laird, 2016), the project at Brookline



High School was co-designed by a team of school-based teachers and leaders in consultation with us as university partners. Major features of the four-year project included:

- Two two-year cycles of professional learning;
- Three teacher teams engaged in each two-year cycle (English, social studies, world languages, math, science, and special education teams);
- Teams composed of six content-area teachers, specialists, or librarians;
- One team leader elected by each team to facilitate meetings;
- Weekly team meetings over the course of each two-year cycle;
- Annual summer professional learning, led by university partners, ranging from two days to one week; and
- Quarterly “days away” during the academic year where all three teams from each cycle converged to share new learning.

Here we focus on how these teams functioned as communities of practice and navigated learning together and using new approaches to instruction.

### TENSION 1:

#### BALANCING AUTONOMY AND SUPPORT FROM LEADERSHIP

The support of school leadership was key to building effective communities of practice. Establishing authentic communities of practice around disciplinary literacy required support from administrators at multiple levels.

A team of teachers, leaders, and we, as university consultants, met over several months to determine how to structure the initiative. Throughout the project, principals, department chairs, and other school and district leaders encouraged the work and supported it by protecting team meeting times, purchasing materials when requested, and asking teams to share their work with broader departments.

It is important to note that sanctioned school leaders did not lead the teams’ work, and school leaders did not push teams to pursue particular agendas or come to certain conclusions. Participants had autonomy to try different instructional practices and make decisions about the utility and effectiveness of those practices. If leadership had dictated the improvement agenda—for instance, mandating that the history team develop assessments of students’ comprehension of key historical texts as opposed to allowing a focus such as this one to emerge organically from within the team—it is unlikely that individuals and communities of practice would have had the same agency in the process of inventing and adapting new practices.

This true ownership of the work, with arms-length support from administrators, was essential to success in the project. The notion of supported autonomy was key to developing the mutual engagement that is described in Wenger’s (1998) definition of a community of practice, facilitating sincere effort on the part of all members to work toward a shared group interest—in this case, disciplinary literacy.

### TENSION 2:

#### BALANCING PROCESS AND PRODUCT

The teams quickly learned that they needed to strike a balance between focusing on products—instructional plans, units, assessments—and the process of learning to work together as communities of practice.

Each team had participants with very different orientations toward the work. Some individuals focused intensely on action, while others focused more on planning. Some participants placed a great deal of attention on considering how the group was getting along, while others were concerned about the efficiency of weekly meetings and whether time was being used well.

For each team’s community of practice to function smoothly, team leaders had to find the right balance between process and products over time. Sometimes this meant that a team needed to ensure the creation of a product for participants to use in the classroom or synthesize their thinking, such as building a website with materials they made or charting all of the vocabulary strategies a team had done.

At other times, the focus needed to shift more to process, with teams spending time learning to use new discussion protocols, finding ways to reflect on group dynamics, determining how they might engage all members in setting meeting agendas, or figuring out when to move from one inquiry cycle to another.

In fairly traditional high schools, like Brookline High, teachers often work independently. Therefore, the process of learning how to work and learn together was essential to moving from a group of individuals focused on similar topics to becoming communities of practice that negotiated careful ways to work together around shared questions.

### TENSION 3:

#### BALANCING OUTSIDE EXPERTISE AND TIME TO FOCUS ON OUR OWN WORK

Though traditional professional development often relies on a single format or approach, this project incorporated multiple learning modalities. At key points, university partners with expertise in professional development and literacy in the disciplines offered sessions on strategies and approaches to integrating literacy into content-area instruction. While more of this guidance happened early on in each two-year cycle, teachers’ dominant form of learning was through the collaborative work carried out in disciplinary teams, where they developed their own inquiry cycles and decided the topics for those cycles.

Though there were key instances in which university partners helped to parse relevant research and share key strategies from the field—such as in the domain of vocabulary instruction—ultimately, this learning took root due to the work that teachers carried out together around each topic. Because the teams controlled their learning, made choices about it, and worked independently, they were able to take ownership of the

work and extend it into their classrooms.

Teachers noted the power of balance between external expertise and teacher-driven learning, with a number mentioning the importance of the “academic” content shared by consultants, which they could digest and enact in collaboration with disciplinary colleagues. Without plenty of time for teachers to focus on learning about new practices, digest expert guidance, look at student work to discern patterns, and design new tasks and lessons, the initiative might have felt as though it was yet another top-down or expert-driven professional development mandate.

#### TENSION 4:

##### BALANCING INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP GOALS

Content-area teams in the project were conducting inquiry cycles into their own practice based on their own students’ classroom performance. This meant that, at times, team members were interested in different questions. Keeping everyone involved in the work of each community of practice meant finding ways to work together as a group while balancing these individual needs. At times, teams could identify a project that would allow them to address a broad question that then allowed for individuals to tailor the inquiry to their own needs and questions.

While some inquiries engaged everyone in a broad topic — with individual personalization as needed — other inquiry cycles created more of a challenge, as team members hoped to branch out in a number of different directions. When members of the English language arts team found themselves torn between focusing on independent reading structures and conducting reading assessment conferences, they decided to work with both topics. Group members shared their individual progress and takeaways on the two different topics with the full group.

This approach allowed team members to follow their interests and still learn from the group at the same time. By balancing individual needs and group needs, the teams were able to structure their work together in order to ensure that participants were able to stay engaged but also behave as cohesive groups when needed.

#### TENSION 5:

##### BALANCING REFLECTION AND DISSEMINATION

As the project unfolded over four years, we learned that there were different ideas about completing work effectively, and this, too, required balance from participants. Some group members would not have felt they had done their work well without stopping periodically to reflect on how their classrooms had changed. While some prized reflection sessions, others were less enthusiastic about spending time on reflection and wanted to get right back to making materials for classroom use and spreading those materials to teachers outside the project.

As each team’s cycle of participation in the project came to a close, each came to several questions about how to conclude

all that they had done. They considered which instructional practices they wanted to keep, which they wanted to encourage others in their departments to try, and which larger stories of learning they wanted to reflect their two years’ of work.

Some teams decided to present their work to their departments or colleagues at local middle schools, while others built websites or presented at local content-specific conferences (e.g. the Massachusetts Reading Association conference, the Massachusetts Foreign Language Association conference). Still others had to find ways to continue implementing projects such as assessments that had been developed during their work together.

This move from inventing to reflecting happened differently for each team, but each had to go through the process of figuring out how to synthesize the work they had done and make determinations about what was worth holding onto and sharing with others.

##### DISRUPTING CULTURES OF ISOLATION

In our experience with the project at Brookline High, we found communities of practice to be powerful tools for improving disciplinary literacy instruction and disrupting the traditionally isolating cultures of secondary schools. Before the initiative, these communities did not exist. They had to be carefully constructed.

To build these communities inside the broader school, we and project participants had to find ways to balance tensions and competing interests within teams, within the project as a whole, and within the ecosystem of the larger school.

Navigating these types of tensions is an inevitable part of building communities of practice — and one that simultaneously serves to strengthen those communities. Such work results in the type of deep collaboration and conversation needed to improve instruction and sustain momentum for improvement.

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