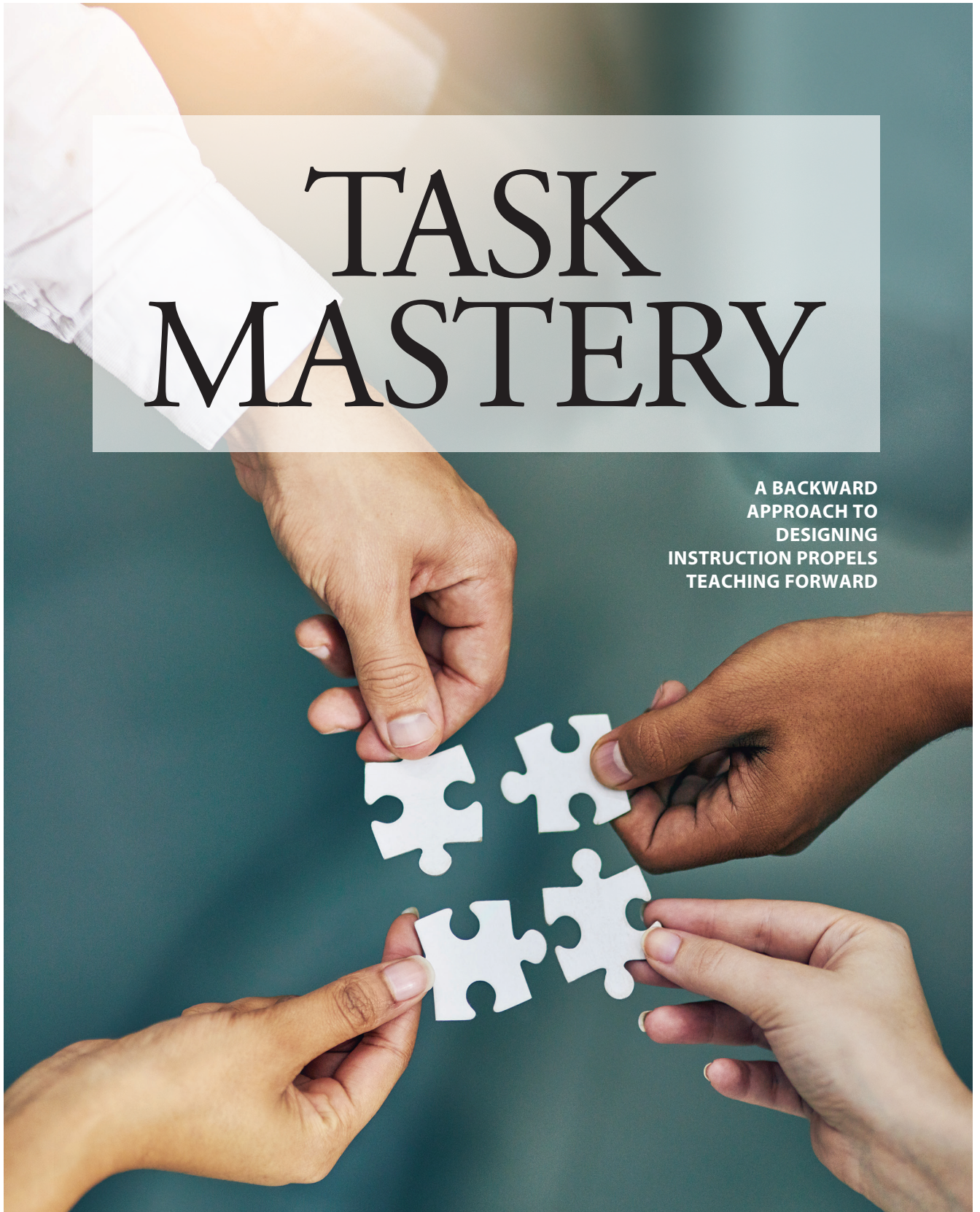


# TASK MASTERY

A BACKWARD  
APPROACH TO  
DESIGNING  
INSTRUCTION PROPELS  
TEACHING FORWARD



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## By Suzanne Simons

*“It’s a completely different mind shift. Before, we were planning in isolation. When we did get together for common planning, I wasn’t evaluating the standards for student mastery, common misconceptions, or instructional implications. If I did, it was hit or miss. It wasn’t a consistent way of thinking and acting, as it is now. Now, we are continually looking at student work, planning based on their needs, adapting instruction, and putting better assignments in front of students. I’m learning from my peers and contributing to better outcomes for everyone involved. It’s truly an empowering experience when teachers are invested.”*

— Tiffany Scott, accelerated resource teacher,  
Mount Dora Middle School, Lake County Schools, Florida

**F**or more than 20 years, education research has pointed to what Lake County teacher Tiffany Scott is experiencing firsthand: Collaboration holds promise for improving teaching and learning. Of course, research also shows that collaboration is a means, not an end.

In *Creating Instructional Capacity*, Joseph Murphy (2016) warns that collaboration in and of itself is not inherently effective (Levine & Marcus, 2010; Penuel, Sussex, Korbak, & Hoadley, 2006). Teachers working together must be organized and supported based on the preponderance of research that shows, in Murphy’s words, how “collective work done well can accelerate their learning and the achievement of their students.”

Ben Jensen furthers this finding in *Beyond PD: Teacher Professional Learning in High-Performing Systems*, noting that the largely effective education systems of British Columbia, Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Singapore focus on teacher learning to impact student learning (Jensen, Sonnemann, Roberts-Hull, & Hunter, 2016).

We are now seeing examples of these types of strong teacher communities of practice emerging closer to home. From Thompson School District bordering the mountains of Northern Colorado, to Lake County Schools on the outskirts of the Florida wetlands, to the urban school districts of New York City and Los Angeles, teachers are working with the Literacy Design Collaborative to develop collabora-

tive practices that support their professional growth and students’ learning.

Literacy Design Collaborative is a network of teachers committed to developing literacy-rich instruction in the content areas and building expertise from teacher to teacher. Drawing on research of adult learning and leveraging new technologies, Literacy Design Collaborative provides the design system, tools, and supports to power effective teacher collaboration and conversations on teacher practice and student learning.

### CREATING AND IMPLEMENTING QUALITY LITERACY-RICH ASSIGNMENTS

The research is clear that teacher professional development is most effective when it focuses on the subject matter teachers teach (Borko, 2004) and on resources that teachers can use immediately with students (Owen, 2003), such as assignments and daily lessons.

Moreover, in *Instructional Rounds in Education*, Richard Elmore (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009) proffers that quality assignments have such an impact on student performance that, more than any other factor in the classroom, “the task predicts performance.”

Within the Literacy Design Collaborative instructional design system, therefore, the task is the anchor for teacher work and student work. Co-designed with teachers, the system guides teachers in a backward design approach that helps teachers create tasks and, from there, strong instructional plans to teach the tasks.

An online learning and collaboration platform called LDC CoreTools provides a space in which teachers can collaboratively create, share, and adapt free, high-quality, literacy-rich assignments. These range from modules (larger “writing-based-on-reading” tasks with sequenced instructional plan taught over one to three weeks) to minitasks (10- to 40-minute lessons focused on particular literacy skills).

While the tools can be used by one teacher who is planning alone, teachers are finding that the tools support collaboration in ways that make the tasks and instructional plans stronger and teacher collaboration real and relevant.

For example, the tools include a curriculum alignment rubric and a peer review system developed by the Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning, and Equity. The rubric and peer review system provide teachers with a lens to

evaluate collaboratively their own tasks and instructional plans for clarity, rigor, and relevance.

As such, the tools depersonalize professional conversations so that teachers can safely challenge and support each other. Ultimately, the tools help to center team conversations around instruction: What are we asking students to do through our tasks, how do we plan to teach them, and what is the evidence of student learning?

In the Thompson School District, for example, teachers are collaboratively designing units that include common Literacy Design Collaborative tasks that they all agree to teach. According to Carmen Williams, Thompson’s director of assessment and professional learning, “Professional learning community time is really starting to shift. We’re not just talking about logistics and individual students, but we’re coming together to design quality tasks and looking at and sharing instructional strategies for teaching those tasks.”

After two years of this work, there is emerging evidence that teacher collaboration around common tasks is having a positive impact on student learning. Thompson’s data from the 2015 PARCC-aligned state assessments shows that 41% of 10th graders who were taught via the common tasks and minitasks met or exceeded the English language arts standards. In comparison, 28% of 10th graders who were not taught via the common tasks and minitasks met or exceeded the English language arts standards.

### LOOKING AT STUDENT WORK

The educators we work with emphasize the importance of having access to tools that support teacher conversations about student work. They echo the research that posits that the most effective professional learning is inquiry-based (Franke, Carpenter, Levi, & Fennema, 2001; Penuel, Fishman, Yamaguchi, & Gallagher, 2007). As Joseph Murphy (2016) sums up in *Creating Instructional Capacity*, “Productive inquiry in professional communities of practice is analytic, dynamic, continuous, and constructivist in nature.”

That’s exactly the type of work the Literacy Design Collaborative system is supporting. We are finding that teachers are using the minitasks as the locus of conversations about student work and instructional choices. Each minitask seeks to develop a specific skill, requires a student product, includes a scoring guide, and outlines example instructional strategies. It’s the perfect “bite-sized” formative assessment for teacher inquiry.

Here’s one example: In Florida’s Lake County Schools, teacher teams are using Literacy Design Collaborative minitasks as the focus of their lesson study. Their lesson cycle includes: Plan the minitask (as mentioned above), teach it, analyze the results, and apply lessons learned.

After looking at student work using the minitask’s scoring guide, teachers analyze their results together to identify the levels of skill development and determine which students need

which type of instruction going forward. According to Mary Ellen Barger, personalized learning facilitator and former English language arts teacher at Windy Hill Middle School, this type of inquiry work requires a learning curve for all involved, but it’s worth it.

“When we first asked teachers to come to the learning team with sample papers, we asked for samples that were high, medium, and low,” Barger said. “In actuality, what we saw was high-high, high, and high-medium [work]. Teachers were scared they were going to be judged and evaluated. So we used that opportunity to help teachers dig deeper into what they saw in those papers. And then, next time, we had them bring back all of their papers. From there, teachers are now becoming great collaborators, really digging into conversations with each other about how they taught a certain skill or got certain results from students.”

Principal Charles McDaniel of East Ridge Middle echoes Barger’s reflections on the lesson study approach using Literacy Design Collaborative minitasks. He notes, “Teachers are asking each other: Why did your students do better than mine on the task? What did you do differently than I did in your instruction?”

In separate conversations, both Barger and McDaniel credit their teacher teams’ use of the lesson study approach with Literacy Design Collaborative for helping their schools earn “A” scores on the Florida School Report Card.

### MORE WAYS TO COLLABORATE

Finally, most images of teachers working and learning together tend to be of teachers within the same school building or district. While schools are physical centers where communities of practice develop, more and more deep teacher learning and collaboration is happening virtually via diverse platforms such as webinars, LDC CoreTools, and even social media sites such as Pinterest.

Interestingly, this is an area where the demand from practice and innovation from the field seem to be outpacing current research. Teachers report that they want further access and opportunities to learn and collaborate with others when needed, as needed, and in ways that model the deeper inquiry work that connects teacher and student learning.

Literacy Design Collaborative was designed with this in mind. Teachers can be involved in a way that is as place-based as the teacher teams of Thompson School District and Lake County Public Schools. Or, through the reach of LDC CoreTools, a teacher can create a virtual community of practice.

For example, LDC CoreTools enables an individual English language arts teacher in California to learn about Literacy Design Collaborative through online courses and materials. Then, to try it out in her classroom, the teacher might use the curriculum library to adapt a module on Kafka’s works that was designed by a teacher in Kentucky.

As the California teacher uses the student work rubric to analyze her students' papers, she might connect with a teacher from New York who used the same task to compare results and then adopt minitasks from a teacher in Pennsylvania to teach a skill she sees that her students still need to develop.

The teacher can also receive virtual professional feedback and recognition of her work via a virtual national peer review process through LDC CoreTools. It's a whole new group of teacher experts to work with and a whole new way to deepen practice.

Literacy Design Collaborative is combining elements of virtual and on-site professional learning to support teacher communities of practice in Los Angeles and New York City through a federal Investing in Innovation (i3) grant. At Saturn Elementary School in Los Angeles, teachers are in their first year of working together to design and implement Literacy Design Collaborative modules.

During on-site Saturday boot camps, teachers delve into the system and tools through online courses and then reflect together on the implications for their practice and classroom. Teachers apply that learning during weekly collaborative planning sessions to design tasks and instructional plans, look at student work, and determine next steps for instruction based on student needs. The teacher team gets additional support from a Literacy Design Collaborative coach, who joins the team bi-weekly via web conferencing to provide guidance and support.

The online nature of the LDC CoreTools platform ensures that this professional collaboration and learning is not confined to or determined by those team times. At any time and from any location, Saturn teachers are able to collaborate, receive feedback from the coach, and design materials.

Saturn principal Tracie Bryant explains how the system became a catalyst for teacher collaboration and professional community in her school: "We had a chance to go into [LDC CoreTools] and try to navigate it. At the onset, it looked really overwhelming because the assumption was that we would still be operating in the same mindset that, 'Everyone is going to have to do everything by themselves.' However, it was just natural that we had to do this together. And the term 'collaborative' became our approach to how we would do our learning ... and that has saved us."

### IT'S A LEARNING PROCESS

The practices we describe here are still new. Teacher leaders, participating teachers, and principals in each of the systems are the first to admit that it will take further time and effort to reach the depth of practice depicted in research and to engage additional colleagues.

They are also straightforward in their advice about how to make communities of practice effective. Mary Ellen Barger of Lake County notes that all teachers must have an equal voice in and ability to contribute to the community. As she says, "It

can't be one-sided, or it's not a growing process for everyone."

Megan Jensen, Literacy Design Collaborative's i3 grant project director, explains, "We've really learned the significance of providing targeted feedback to teachers directly about their work. The LDC curriculum alignment rubric, module structure, and online planning tools are starting to allow teachers to give one another real, targeted feedback, rather than the general, 'This looks good.'"

Tiffany Scott at Mount Dora Middle School might very well offer up the best summary of what Literacy Design Collaborative teachers working in communities of practice is all about: "We need to remember that it's not about the individual. It's about the work, the students, the practice of teaching."

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