



MOTIVATION IN MOTION

LEARNING WALKS BENEFIT TEACHERS AND STUDENTS IN A DUAL-LANGUAGE PRIMARY SCHOOL

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This article describes an approach to learning walks that focuses on enhancing student intrinsic motivation and learning at a dual-language pre-K-8 urban public school. The descriptions and ideas in this case study are a composite based on the real-life experiences of the authors as well as ideas from literature and experiences at other schools.

Talcott Fine Arts and Museum Academy's commitment to the dreams and challenges of the Chicago, Illinois, school's diverse families is evident in its well-maintained historic facade, vibrant hallways, colorful displays of student work, and dual-language classrooms.

In these classrooms, students who

are dominant in English learn Spanish, and students who are dominant in Spanish learn English. The goal of this two-way process is for students to become bilingual global citizens whose academic accomplishment is inseparable from a lifelong value for learning and concern for others.

Over the past decade, dual-language programs have grown tenfold, with

more than 2,000 now operating, including more than 300 in the state of New York alone, according to Jose Ruiz-Escalante, president of the National Association for Bilingual Education (Wilson, 2011). Large U.S. cities such as New York and Washington, D.C., are actively expanding their programs. Census Bureau data indicate that recent immigrants comprise 13.3% of the total U.S. population, reaching the highest national level in 105 years (Camarota, 2016).

Given the rise in students who speak a language other than English at home and dwindling resources for professional learning in urban public schools, the need for schools to develop in-house systems for teachers to learn continuously from one another is great. This is a particular priority for dual-language schools, given the limited number of fully certified dual-language teachers and the importance of teaching language goals along with content knowledge goals.

TEAMS AT WORK

At least once a week at Talcott Fine Arts and Museum Academy, the principal, assistant principal, or teacher leaders lead a learning walk with a different grade level of teachers. A primary purpose of the learning walks is to deprivatize teaching and learning in ways that encourage instructional improvement conversations focused on intrinsic motivation as the foundation for language learning and academic success.

On this first Tuesday of the month, school leaders join the 7th-grade team

during its collaborative planning period to visit two 6th-grade classrooms and two 8th-grade classrooms for six to seven minutes each.

Using a rubric with a set of look-fors and a protocol that teachers have tested and revised, the principal quickly reviews the approach and schedule for the day's visits. She reminds teachers that there are two teams with three educators per team, and each team will visit four classrooms.

The two teams will each look for two of the four conditions of the motivational framework for culturally responsive teaching (Ginsberg, 2015). Talcott uses this meta-framework to guide instructional planning so that it consistently supports students' intrinsic motivation to learn.

In each of the four classrooms, one team will look for examples of an inclusive and emotionally safe learning environment by attending to observable norms and groupwork. The team will also interview a student to understand whether that student finds learning relevant and supportive of student choice.

The other team will look for challenge and engagement, noting how the quality of work supports language development and deep learning, and questions the teacher asks. This team will also pay attention to assessment practices that strengthen learning, such as student self-assessment and teacher feedback to students.

As teams begin their visits, they enter together and engage with students when it seems appropriate. Sometimes team members find a quiet place, such

GETTING STARTED

Our work typically begins with a set of considerations that have been informed by literature and experience.

- What should we name our approach?
- What are our purposes, and how will we communicate them?
- Who should participate in developing our process?
- Who would participate in the visits?
- What are the assumptions that will guide our work as adult learners?
- How will we ensure respect for teachers and students?
- What should educators look for or notice that aligns with our instructional and social-emotional priorities?
- What tools do we need, and how should they look?
- What kinds of feedback will teachers appreciate and apply?
- How will teachers use feedback?
- Who should participate, and in what roles?
- With attention to time constraints and other logistics, what routines align with our purposes?
- How will school leaders maintain learning walks as a priority?
- How will we assess and improve upon this work?

as along a wall, to stand or sit as they observe. After about five minutes, the leader signals the team to exit, and the team shares insights in the hallway as the leader tallies quantitative data on a single form for later deliberation. Quantitative data involve ranking specific look-fors on a scale of high, medium, low, or not seen this visit. Qualitative data are examples or questions.

When the visits are complete, the teams gather in a conference room to discuss what they noticed about the learning experiences of students they will have in their classes next year and those of former students who are now in the 8th grade. They also discuss insights and ideas that can strengthen their own teaching.

After the meeting, a school leader drafts a brief, nonevaluative instructional memo that describes exemplary practices, seeks additional information (such as, “We wondered if a student by the window often has difficulty engaging with lessons or if today was unusual for that student”) or raises a question (such as, “How do students typically encourage one another to speak?”).

The school leader reminds teachers that, while a brief visit can be misleading or incomplete, it can also reveal valuable insights that teachers may find useful. She then places the learning walk data in a folder so that it can be analyzed eventually for trends across the school.

Although the school initially wanted aggregated feedback that protected teachers’ anonymity, the adult learning environment at Talcott has become more trusting over time. Teachers often request individual feedback. Nonetheless, the feedback teachers receive is entirely nonevaluative, and its use is a matter of teacher prerogative. It is never included in teacher evaluation records.

The feedback is designed to support adult motivation to learn. It begins by noting an accomplishment, then is followed by an inquiry question, an offer of a resource, and words of encouragement.

WHAT TEACHERS SAY

Teacher surveys about these learning walks parallel other schools that use a similar approach. Teachers are surprised at how much they learn from brief, collaborative classroom visits and that the process helps them think about their own teaching. They believe the experience contributes to ongoing instructional collaboration and helps shift conversations about student performance from “fixing kids” to strengthening teaching and learning.

Finally, colleagues appreciate the ways in which learning walk experiences and trend data from across the school enrich instructional improvement conversations at monthly staff meetings.

Ultimately, adult learners are similar to their students. Most human beings are motivated to learn when the conditions for doing so are inclusive and safe, relevant and responsive to learner input, engaging, substantive, and useful. At Talcott and elsewhere, administrative teams rarely hear teachers say, “We’re already doing that” without following it up with a qualifying comment such as, “Now I can see what I’m leaving out when I plan learning experiences. I am going to work on improving that phase of my lesson plans.”

AN ETHIC THAT GUIDES LEARNING WALK ROUTINES

As this scenario suggests, we advocate for professional learning that is inclusive, respects teacher agency, and provides feedback in ways teachers value and can apply.

Nonetheless, even when there is a clear set of look-fors, teachers will see

what leaders regularly notice: In some classrooms, a full range of students engage in deep learning and time seems to fly, while in other classrooms, students struggle to remain alert.

While trust is always a work in progress, it is important to plan ways to foster trust. One way to do this is through agreed-upon and occasionally reviewed norms such as mutual respect, an open and curious orientation to learning, and confidentiality with sensitive information.

Most educators understand that things may go more smoothly on some days than on others for reasons that are personal or even inexplicable. In addition, the broader policy environment is relentless in its expectations of schools. This can inadvertently encourage a classroom teacher to take the fastest (and most cursory) approach to achieve student learning goals.

This is exacerbated in under-resourced schools by budget constraints that make sustained professional learning appear to be an unaffordable luxury. Careful planning can keep the process focused on what teachers care about most — helping students thrive as human beings and learners.

CAVEATS

Sustainable learning walk routines take into account an adult learning precept: Although a new learning experience can be transformative, it sometimes begins with a somewhat disorienting event.

For teachers who have been socialized in their families and communities to be deferential to other professionals, participating in generating feedback for colleagues may seem uncomfortable initially. Further, too much ambiguity can be overwhelming and favor adults who are comfortable jumping in.

This unequal participation is

exacerbated when early adopters become so excited about their own learning that they inadvertently marginalize their peers. Transformation theory points toward clear and respectful norms of interaction and carefully planned structures for sense making (Mezirow, 2000). Without this, a process can stall.

Should your approach flounder, we suggest further consideration of the following questions:

- What do we need to do to remain respectful of others and open to learning?
- What do we need to do to ensure that feedback is productive for visitors and teachers being visited?
- How can we improve the logistics?
- What can we do if negative comments about teaching and learning or the process of learning walks arise?

Respectful, relevant, and substantive collaboration requires careful planning. It is always a work in progress.

WHAT WE ARE LEARNING

Experience has shown that across schools, teacher responses to collaborative, school-defined learning walks are similar. Comments from teachers and administrators include:

- In staff meetings, grade-level meetings, and causal conversations, we frequently hear teachers talking about instruction.
- Our relationships develop with each other because of the walks, and this deepens the schoolwide conversation about the learning environment.
- We are modeling what a learning community means, and the students benefit from this model.
- We are able to see how the

LEARN MORE

- A U.S. Department of Education-funded video demonstrates some of the ideas in this article: www.youtube.com/watch?v=IBmILyXCzs.
- See lesson study at a dual-language school in action at www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hz0-8qFrbGY&t=1s.

curriculum spirals as the age of the child increases, thereby reinforcing essential skills.

- We have an increased level of professional awareness regarding the complexity of instruction at all grade levels. A 1st-grade classroom can seem more complex to run than a middle school classroom.
- A classroom needs to be protected from distractions while still embracing the new tools and information we have at our fingertips. We find out who can help us with this challenge when we are on a walk.

Teachers also appreciate having a manageable set of motivational look-fors to guide their observations. In the past, when teachers visited other classrooms at Talcott, they tried to notice everything at once or only one thing. The approach seemed overwhelming, random, and could distract from opportunities to notice more consequential interactions.

Administrators frequently mention that participating in learning walks requires a firm commitment because of unpredictable competing priorities. This is especially the case in smaller schools because backup staff for crises is limited.

In addition, small schools may not have the luxury of art, physical

education, and resource teachers to free classrooms teachers who are scheduled to do a learning walk. Under-resourced schools may not have the funding for substitute teachers who can cover classes for learning walk participants.

Finally, while learning walk data are informative, other forms of professional learning help teachers effectively apply new insights. We agree with Bloom (2007): “No one model is sufficient to support a systemic school improvement process. ... Done well, classroom visitations tied to professional learning communities and continuous improvement processes have transformative power.”

Because of this, we complement learning walks with lesson studies, through which teachers plan an intrinsically motivating and language-rich lesson together, watch a team member teach it in real-time, and deliberate opportunities for improvement afterwards (Stephens, 2011; Lewis, Perry, Friedkin, & Roth, 2012).

These practices provide feedback at its best. They identify “what is good and why, as well as what needs to be improved and how” (Brophy, 2004, p. 72). Given the track record of academic performance at the authors’ school and other schools with similar practices, it is easy to understand the significance of rich instructional discourse routines to ongoing school improvement (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009; Portin et al., 2009; Coburn, 2003).

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STANDARDS FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Each of these examples demonstrates potential starting points for the development of a culture of collaboration and curiosity that connects teachers within and across classrooms and school sites in any community. Learning Forward’s Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011) serve as the foundation.

First and foremost, each example highlights the power of a **learning community** of educators coming together to meet their own, authentic needs. The content of the collaboration evolves as the needs of the students and teachers — as identified by the participants in the group, using a range of **data** — evolve.

Each group began by assessing and determining its shared needs and created **learning designs** to focus time and resources to meet those learning needs. District and site **leadership** supported

the culture of professional learning both logistically, by protecting time within contract hours or offering compensation for meeting outside of school time, and in practice, by allowing space for teacher leadership as responsibility for facilitation moved from the coach to the teachers themselves.

As a result of these intentional moves, the **outcomes** of professional collaboration were immediately applicable for **implementation** in classrooms with positive learning outcomes for students.

LEARNING TIED TO TEACHERS’ NEEDS

We are learning that a culture of continuous professional learning grows from a shared vision and focus on teacher empowerment and agency to build teachers’ own expertise in alignment with their real needs and goals. Just as students learn best when exploring topics tied to their interests, when early learning teachers engage

in ongoing learning that is driven by their context, an inspiring culture of collaboration and commitment to more equitable student outcomes for our youngest learners emerges.

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