



A DIFFERENT KIND OF BOOK CLUB

CHOICE AND VOICE FUEL LEARNING IN HAWAII'S TEACHER LEADER ACADEMY

BY SANDY CAMELI

Schools and districts have held book clubs for professional learning for decades. Unfortunately, the scenario often looks like this: An administrator hands out a book and asks the staff to read, discuss, and prepare to act on the latest initiative in education. This is often followed by staff members returning to their classrooms or offices, sticking the title on a shelf, and forgetting about the assignment, as the life of school takes over.

Fast-forward months later, when dust has settled on a collection of professional readings and the purpose has ultimately been forgotten. Topics and titles preselected by an individual or small team limit the impact of such professional learning. This one-size-fits-all format rarely yields beneficial outcomes for leaders, let alone those being led, especially if rationale or relevancy have not been clearly identified.

In the Hawaii Department of Education, educators participating

in Na Kumu Alaka'i Teacher Leader Academy are breaking this mold by engaging in unbook clubs (Cameli, 2013), shared learning experiences that focus on a topic but are not limited to one reading or resource. Similar to open space experiences (Open Space Institute, n.d.) or unconferences (Unconference.net, n.d.), unbook clubs begin with participants posing ideas or suggestions about themes, topics, or goals, then inviting others to join in a conversation.

Participants bring information

The structure of an unbook club provides exposure to multiple sources while also honoring the fluidity of objectives and outcomes.

or knowledge about the agreed-upon topic and share in small or large groups. Resources often come from books or articles, but they also include TED talks, webinars, podcasts, personal musings, and online collections. The structure of an unbook club provides exposure to multiple sources while also honoring the fluidity of objectives and outcomes. A facilitator can help participants maximize the learning experience, but the discussions are meant to be grassroots and flow based on individual and shared goals.

FINDING FOCUS

Teachers from across the state of Hawaii participate in the Teacher Leader Academy. They bring a multitude of backgrounds and experiences to the program, from early childhood through high school teaching, urban and rural communities, and multigenerational experiences, which allow for rich and relevant discussions.

The academy allows teacher leaders to participate in action research, examine their individual growth through reflective writing pieces, and hone collaborative and facilitative skills to lead others. But it is the opportunity to engage in an unbook club that

garners the most enthusiastic feedback.

One example: In September 2017, a group of curriculum coordinators and academic coaches decided to focus on the problem of practice of effective coaching and facilitation strategies. The six participating teacher leaders made a commitment to one another to seek out resources, experiences, and opportunities to bring back to the group on this topic. Before the next convening, they created a Google doc for the team to upload collected resources to share and build on.

SHARING RESOURCES

Six weeks later, the teacher leaders were ready to share resources. They agreed on a structure for the 70 minutes allotted during the convening: opening (five minutes); individual sharing (20 minutes); deeper conversations (30 minutes); and closing/next steps (15 minutes).

During the opening, the group revisited the theme of coaching and facilitation identified during the first session. One participant reviewed the previous session's brainstorming notes and invited members to add updated goals to the shared document.

During individual sharing, each participant took three minutes to share

ABOUT THE NA KUMU ALAKA'I TEACHER LEADER ACADEMY

Educators participating in Na Kumu Alaka'i Teacher Leader Academy attend professional learning sessions aimed at nudging master teachers out of the classroom and into leadership roles to impact peers and school or district-level initiatives.

Coupled with the Teacher Leader Model Standards (NNSTOY, 2017), the Hawaii Department of Education (HIDOE, n.d.) uses its Leadership Competencies (HIBOE, 2015) to provide a strong foundation for innovation, collaboration, and personal and professional growth for all its aspiring and practicing leaders.

Professional learning is designed to promote and endorse educational leadership in Hawaii's public schools and align with the eight competencies identified: achievement focus, instructional and learning leadership, family and community engagement, talent development, reflection and integrity, communication and relationships, change leadership, and resource leadership.

Teacher leaders are invited to leverage their expertise as practitioners to promote learning, improve practice, and help grow capacity within others. Thus, when choice and voice are routinely embedded into professional development, talent is expanded and leadership shared between colleagues.



AHA! TEMPLATE FOR COLLABORATIVE CONVERSATIONS		
(A)wareness	(H)elp?	(A)ct!
<p><i>Summary of new information shared</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Finding Your Voice” — V. von Frank. • Facilitating strategies — differentiating between dialogue and discussion. • Use of sentence stems (i.e. paraphrasing, clarifying, mediational Qs, nonjudgmental, collaborative conversations). • Introduction of trust scales to help build relationships between peers/ teams. 	<p><i>What questions do I have?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do we plan for hard conversations? • What models/training exist to support teachers transitioning from classroom to nonclassroom roles to support colleagues/peers? • How do we empower those teachers — who often don’t realize the value of their contributions — with peers who would benefit from a mentor? 	<p><i>Next steps, ideas to pursue</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set timeline for a curriculum coordinator blog. • Revisit unbook club resources and conversations quarterly. • (Teacher X) to invite/host team to school for walk-through visitations in spring.

contributions to pique interest for the forthcoming engaging conversations. Then the group began discussions on the various topics, either as a whole or working in small groups.

Originally seated in six chairs around one large table, the teammates soon broke off into pairs and trios based on their desire to seek understanding through deeper conversations. And, similar to the Law of Two Feet (Bagley, 2014), in which individuals move freely between conversations based on interest and resources provided, the teacher leaders simply regrouped their chairs around the table as conversations naturally ebbed and flowed until the unbook club came to a close.

As participants gained new perspectives and challenged their own thinking, they used the Aha! tool (see above) to capture the experience, record questions, and plan for next steps.

As the designated time waned, the group reconvened for closing and next steps. Using the original shared document as a collection tool, the group highlighted additional resources to pursue as common goals, in addition to their independent work supporting school-level initiatives.

They agreed to continue leading and learning together and identified secondary topics, such having hard

conversations, building capacity within a school, and cultivating leadership opportunities for others, for the next gathering in January 2018.

The team’s concentrated effort not only allowed each coach or coordinator to elevate his or her individual skill set, but the opportunity to share problems of practice for this role group added value to the program as a whole and the K-12 school representatives in attendance. The collective efforts of all participants contributed to building an ongoing library of resources and professional learning scenarios that could be replicated at other schools or learning environments.

And, although the academy cohort formally convened for just one school calendar year, the unbook club structure enabled the 40-plus teacher leaders to continue conversations, reflections, and exchanges into subsequent years, as shared through emails, social media posts, and presentations at local workshops and conferences.

PAYING IT FORWARD

Many Teacher Leader Academy graduates and teacher leaders at the school level are often tasked with using what they learned to motivate peers and pay it forward to the next generation of

learning leaders. In this way, unbook clubs and other models and protocols they obtained through the program are replicated and prove to be invaluable resources beyond the original cohort of participants.

This opportunity to “lead from behind,” by guiding peers through self-selection of professional growth opportunities, is a value-added contribution to participants’ careers and to their schools and districts. Participants have told us that the self-directed learning helps them be more reflective.

The unbook club format is just one example of how learning leaders develop ownership for their professional growth while also honoring relevancy for individual and collective needs. An unbook club may not work in all environments, nor will all participants be eager to embrace the ambiguity of direction for this type of professional development.

However, when given the opportunity to include multiple perspectives and ideas during a dedicated time frame for professional growth, teachers demonstrate increased ownership and are more proactive — something that becomes visible to educators at the school, district, and state levels.

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Learning conversations

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deserving. They agreed that excellence at their school could be awarded and should be recognized, but that this might mean not participating every year, reserving it for times it was really warranted.

The final conversation type, MOVE, is useful when all the above strategies have been tried. When a person is still unable or unwilling to make necessary changes, and the behavior impacts the classroom or professional practices in a negative way, the administrator needs to step in and create an exit strategy. Conversations guided by MOVE can help facilitate and ease that difficult process.

When conducted with a supportive, firm message, "This is not working and you need to move on," we have been surprised to observe shifts. When this conversation frames multiple options and communicates the supervisor's intent to move the employee on, the employee starts to move toward options. When an employee realizes that his or her job is in jeopardy, he or she can become motivated enough to change.

Sometimes it is too late to change the trajectory, but in good conscience we know we are sending this person to the next job with a better

understanding of how to make changes and move toward more successful professional practices.

CHOOSE A STARTING PLACE

There is no one perfect conversation. We recommend that coaches and facilitators choose a starting place and then shift the conversations as needed. Finally, the most valuable part of these conversations is the cumulative impact they have on the culture of our schools.

As teachers experience more and more of these productive collaborations, they became proactive and suggest other reflective conversations, and they begin to find ways to use these same reflective practices with their students.

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