



Communities of practice empower teachers to tackle thorny problems

BY THOMAS R. FELLER JR., ELIZABETH MYERS, AND ASHLEY SMITH

One of the most effective forms of professional learning happens when teachers conduct collaborative inquiry in their own classrooms around difficult and challenging topics — even topics that are potentially divisive.

We've seen this powerful process at work in our district in Pitt County, North Carolina, where teachers became collaborative researchers and addressed instructional problems of practice in

their own classrooms. They developed and used skills to better understand diverse perspectives, analyzed data to efficiently examine possible causes, and engaged in a collaborative cycle of inquiry to investigate and address the underlying issues.

We found that this process leads to positive changes, even in areas that are complex and sometimes conflictual. Problems of practice are, by definition, persistent and not easy to solve, and many of them hold the potential to

challenge teachers' underlying beliefs and assumptions around teaching and learning. This can often lead to conflict and disagreement.

We have found, though, that the structure of our communities of practice empowers educators to come together to address these difficult, even potentially divisive, problems in ways that result in improved student learning and increased teacher efficacy, understanding, and collaboration. According to facilitating teacher Leia

Grigg, working in a community of practice was “very empowering and shifted the joy in teaching to where you felt like you were actually making a difference ... with your colleagues.”

BUILDING EFFECTIVE COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

In Pitt County Schools, all teachers serve as members of a professional learning community (PLC) to work on and examine progress toward instructional objectives and measure student learning aligned to district pacing guides. As a complement to PLCs, our community of practice model affords teacher leaders an opportunity to deeply investigate specific problems of practice impacting student learning.

Teachers interested in serving on a community of practice can apply for the position of facilitating teacher (the one who leads the group) or collaborating teacher (a group member). Applicants are screened at the district level and hired by individual school principals, and the roles both require meeting differentiated criteria in order to qualify.

We define a community of practice as a team of teachers who engage in a collaborative inquiry cycle leading to both student and teacher learning. In the cycle, members:

- Use data to identify a common problem of practice;
- Theorize potential reasons for the data they observe;

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- Research possible strategies to address the problem;
- Decide on and implement strategies;
- Measure evidence-based outcomes and adjust their instruction accordingly; and
- Share the results of their learning with colleagues within the school and across the district.

In communities of practice, teacher leaders work “beyond the scope of their normal classroom practice,” said principal Sara English. “They have training that prepares them to facilitate excellent meetings and problem-solve with their colleagues around a research-based and evidence-based problem of practice [and] ... then apply what they learned together in their classrooms with their students.”

Effective communities of practice are characterized both by the “how” and the “what” — that is, how teachers work together *and* the inquiry they engage in. Humility, trust, and mutual respect defined *how* teachers collaborated in the communities of practice in our district. A consistent, identified cycle of inquiry defined *what* their work was.

Humble inquiry is the “how.”

We describe the process of implementing a culture of humility, trust, and mutual respect as humble inquiry. Having humility gave teachers the ability to own their learning and connect it to the learning of other professionals and the students they served.

We saw teachers shift from talking about “me” and “my students” to “we” and “our students.” They listened to understand and learn from each other, rather than to respond and insert their own narrative. The community of practice process “taught me to sit back and listen, and process everything before I just jumped in and tried to fix it,” said facilitating teacher Nicole Leary. “As a teacher [I was used to] saying, ‘Let me fix your problems.’ Now it’s everybody listening and coming together.” This helped teachers avoid the groupthink and toxic passive-aggressive environment prevalent in American culture.

A critical aspect of trusting and respecting others involved learning to focus on the ideas rather than the people who brought them. In communities of practice, teachers developed skills to engage in cognitive conflict. In these robust dialogues, all voices were heard and respected and all questions honored. Teachers “presum[ed] positive intentions and knew we were all there to support one another — it was all about growth,” said facilitating teacher Cassie Creech.

Teachers identified several key skills that helped them develop as humble collaborators. The first was to focus on their own listening skills, particularly listening without passing judgment. Group members had to focus on “listening to understand and not just respond,” said facilitating teacher Elizabeth Burch-Patterson, which allowed them to examine “issues from various perspectives [and be] clear in our understanding of what [others] are saying.”

Facilitating teacher Shani Smith-Amplify said she would regularly remind members, “We’ll be listening [and] presuming positive intent.” One of her goals was to “[make] sure that everyone [knew] that they [were] free to speak. And that what they [said would not] be taken maliciously, but in a vein of we’re all trying to learn.”

Two skills that supported them in doing this were to pause before offering their own thoughts and paraphrase what others were saying to ensure everyone understood and felt heard.

Data-driven problems of practice are the “what.”

Establishing a humble, trusting, and respectful culture enabled teachers to engage in the substance of collaborative inquiry. After analyzing data and clarifying the focus of their research, teachers examined possible factors contributing to observed gaps and designed strategies to try. Upon implementation, teachers recorded progress and modified strategies based on their results. Ultimately, teachers reported their results so others could learn as well.

For example, based on low

9th-grade academic performance and attendance, one middle school community of practice researched strategies to prepare students to more successfully transition into high school. By analyzing their survey and discipline data, they discovered that students experienced a lack of connection with their middle school teachers, leading to disengagement that persisted into 9th grade. As a result, the teachers researched and applied strategies to get to know their students better and develop positive relationships with them.

Through this process, they also uncovered some of their own internal biases that kept them from developing these pivotal relationships. For example, one teacher held a perspective that she would call students “sir” and “ma’am,” with the intention of showing respect to them, but students felt disconnected

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because they believed the teacher didn't know their names.

During a community of practice meeting, as the members challenged and listened to each other's perspectives, she came to realize the need to communicate respect in a different way and began calling students by their names, even though it was uncomfortable for her. Moreover, every teacher in the room that day made a commitment to intentionally use students' given names.

After making this change, the teachers noted that student engagement increased in their classes, and district administrators have seen significant changes in that middle school's culture as a whole (Pitt County Schools, 2020). (Long-term impact data on 9th-grade achievement and attendance are not yet available.)

SUPPORT FOR COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Changes like these did not happen immediately or accidentally. They required intentional support and training. On both the school and district level, we were intentional about establishing supports for our teachers in communities of practice.

At the district level, community of practice facilitators engaged in professional learning to help them fully understand the collaborative style of leadership their role required, including strategies for intentionally developing trust, effective communication, and collaboration. Participants focused on topics such as listening to understand, paraphrasing, and different dialogue protocols to use when emotions might be running high.

Internal coaches facilitated both

custom-designed and off-the-shelf professional learning. The time spent building those relationships was integral to the capacity of the team to delve into difficult topics.

We then worked with each team facilitator to develop his or her ability to lead colleagues through a defined data process.

Every facilitator also received ongoing support from a district coach, who provided targeted coaching, process modeling, and one-on-one support tailored to specific needs in areas such as modeling the inquiry cycle or planning with the facilitator before a meeting.

At the school level, principals and other administrators committed to the discovery process and demonstrated their investment in the success of the communities of practice. Principal Sara

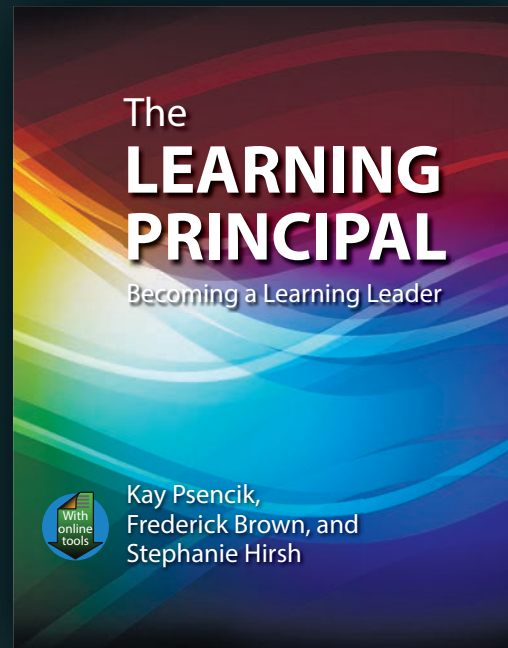
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English emphasized the importance of creating dedicated time, saying that her role involved “giving them time, making sure that the culture of the school recognizes that the time they set aside to meet is sacred, and working very hard not to schedule anything that would interfere.”

Both teachers and principals embraced the philosophy “go slow to go fast” (Bach, 2017), and they recognized that the hard work of transforming schools required time and dedication.

IMPACT OF COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY

The work of communities of practice in our district has contributed to increased student learning, improved teacher practice, and transformed school culture, according to a third-party evaluation and teachers’ own research. (Findings from the latter can be found at the website www.successforeverychild.com.)

The external evaluation showed that teachers who participated in communities of practice showed a statistically significant increase in student achievement scores as compared to their peers. The average value-added score for teachers in communities of practice rose over 300% more than for nonparticipants when comparing results from one year to the next.

In one school, the number of 2nd-

and 3rd-grade students in community of practice members’ classrooms who were proficient in reading increased 168% over the course of one year, suggesting a significant link between the work of the community of practice members and student learning (Measurement Incorporated, 2018, 2019).

Looking at state ratings of schools based on student performance, our district saw the number of schools with a D grade drop by half and the percentage of schools rated A, B, or C rise from 57% to 78% (Measurement Incorporated, 2020). Communities of practice were one initiative among several that may have contributed to these improvements, and we therefore cannot quantify a direct link. However, we did notice an apparent connection between schools with high-quality community of practice implementation and increased school grades.

Teachers and administrators also documented improvements on student learning. According to principal Janarde Cannon, his school’s Math I scores were the highest they’ve been in eight years, something he directly attributed to the work the Math I teachers completed as part of their community of practice. In that same school, where another group of teachers focused on aligning work across content areas to improve ACT scores, student performance on the test exceeded what

we expected based on their pre-ACT test results. Typically, students score similarly on the pre-test and the ACT, but in this cohort, proficiency jumped from 29% on the pretest to 44% on the ACT, which equated to about 55 more students being proficient than expected (Measurement Incorporated, 2018).

There were also strong impacts on teachers. Participating teachers reported they felt more empowered and respected and that the ability to work on a problem of practice transformed how they viewed their roles as teachers. This was encouraging because, too often, educators view research as something that happens elsewhere, with little relevance to their day-to-day lives.

“I felt stagnant in my teaching career,” facilitating teacher Amanda Davis said. “Once I began collaborating with colleagues in efforts to solve a specific problem using research and data analysis, my passion for teaching was reignited. I felt that I was not only growing as a teacher but evolving into a teacher leader.”

Similarly, Cassie Creech, a 3rd-grade facilitating teacher, said the work they did “has really changed what it means to be a teacher and made us get out of our four walls and realize our impact beyond classroom, beyond grade level, to whole-school.”

We also observed transformation at the school level. Elementary principal

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Sara English told us that she doesn't have to micromanage her teachers because "the skills and capabilities and leadership development is there. In a lot of cases, I just get to be a fly on the wall. And I'm excited about it happening."

Other principals reported that teachers engaged in collaborative inquiry were sharing their results with peers and conducting school-level professional learning based on their work. Kim Smith, an elementary instructional coach, said the learning experienced by teachers in communities of practice is having "a trickle-down effect."

LESSONS LEARNED

Reflecting on four years of developing and working with communities of practice, several lessons rise to the top for others seeking to develop teacher leaders into collaborative teacher researchers.

First, developing safety and trust is critical to creating a collaborative learning culture, and it takes deliberate, intentional professional learning and continual reinforcement. Investing the time to establish protocols creates a psychologically safe environment, which is crucial to the deep thinking and risk-taking in which communities of practice engage, especially around sensitive topics. As facilitating teacher Nicole Telson said, "No matter what, if you don't have trust, you're not going to get anywhere."

Second, when preparing teachers for collaborative work, focusing on communication skills is important. While most training in communication skills focuses on how to effectively deliver a message, our participants reported over and over that it was their development of listening skills that made the most impact on their work.

Third, as a natural outgrowth of listening and creating safe spaces, teacher leaders must reframe cognitive conflict as a tool for growth. Our most successful communities of practice found their work to be more robust when they broke "the culture of nice"

(MacDonald, 2011) and found room for different perspectives. "Even if we disagree," said Nicole Leary, "we disagree professionally."

Fourth, communities of practice need to commit to both a structured procedure for examining data and a structured process for conducting those meetings and talking with each other. This is the heart of the work, and as groups become fluent in the language of the procedure and process, their work becomes more meaningful and has more capacity to influence others.

SMALL CHANGES THAT LEAD TO BIG RESULTS

An adage we live by in our district is that small changes hold the potential to result in large-scale transformation, and the work of communities of practice serves as a perfect example of this. When given the tools and support to research an identified problem of practice, teachers can speak with a collective voice and address problems in real time, leading to a sense of teacher efficacy.

"A lot of the teachers were super excited to see, OK, somebody's finally trying to figure out something about [this problem]," Kim Smith said. "We're not just talking about a problem, we're not just saying it's a problem — we actually have a group of teachers that are trying out things."

This process enables teachers to discuss difficult, divisive topics in productive and meaningful ways. Even when they couldn't resolve issues, they were able to come away with deeper understanding and respect of different opinions and perspectives.

Shani Smith-Ampley said that "it might kick up some feelings. But remember, everyone, we're all right — it's OK. And we want a difference of opinion. Because how am I going to understand something? Because you don't know what you don't know. So I need you to bring your point of view to this conversation so we can meet and have common ground."

When teachers are willing to engage

in research around difficult, potentially divisive topics, and they have the skills to do so with grace, humility, and confidence, they can make progress. When they are able to base their decisions on data, consider contributing factors, develop a plan of action to implement specific strategies, and measure progress, change can happen.

Teachers are realizing, through their own collaborative research, what works and doesn't work with their students. As they share their lessons with others, students and teachers learn together.

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