

critical links: A professional inquiry process

1A.1

Getting Started: Why create a learning community?

Teachers may come together to create a learning community for many reasons. Principals or site councils may form learning communities to initiate curriculum reform or improve instructional practices. The district or the state may require professional development plans that include collegial interaction. Or, teachers may decide to support each other in continued learning because they are committed to improving classroom practice. Whatever the reason, worthwhile learning communities must involve more than dull meetings where teachers re-hash what they already know.

To be successful, learning communities must engage teachers' hearts and minds. The activities must remind us why we became educators in the first place—because we enjoy learning, because school was where we experienced success, and because we are committed to educating others.

What are the two most important reasons to form a learning community?

Research has shown that:

1. When teachers learn together, students are more successful
Charlotte Danielson, *Enhancing Student Achievement*, 2002.
2. When educators at a specific site create shared knowledge, it is more meaningful
because it arises from the local school context
Terry Baker, telephone conference, 2004.

How do we create a learning community?

There are only three necessary initial actions:

1. *Make a commitment.* Agree to investigate important questions in teaching and learning. Formalize the commitment by taking a voice vote, raising hands or signing a piece of paper.
2. *Stipulate a time frame.* The commitment could be time-bound, for example, a specific number of months. Or it could be an agreement to meet for as long as it takes for everyone in the group to complete their study.
3. *Determine facilitation.* The community will function more smoothly with facilitation. Different members may agree to facilitate each meeting or several people may volunteer to co-facilitate all the meetings.

critical links: A professional inquiry process

1A.2

Getting Acquainted: Why get to know one another?

Creating a learning community is not the same as becoming friends. Participants don't need to socialize or become buddies. It is simply an agreement that for this professional interaction, participants view each other as individuals who possess unique perspectives and can contribute to developing shared knowledge.

Providing a structure for sharing allows each person to contribute his/her voice to the community and helps people see each other as individuals with different perspectives.

You may use the following activity, *Where am I in this piece of art?* to begin developing a spirit of professional camaraderie, or you may want to create your own activity using this as a model. The important idea is to take the time to build working relationships within your community and to maintain that spirit by reconnecting each time you meet as a group.

Where am I in this piece of art?

1. Lay out a selection of art prints, several more than the number of participants. These do not have to be expensive prints, you may use pictures from art calendars, postcards from museums, or old art books. It is more interesting if a variety of impressionistic, abstract, and realistic styles are included.
2. Ask people to select the picture they find most interesting at this particular moment.
3. Ask people to pair up and explain their answers to the following three questions to a partner.
 - What about the picture was appealing or interesting? (Why did you choose it?)
 - Where are you in the picture? (How is the picture similar to or a representation of your life?)
 - How is the picture different from your life?
4. Ask people to share their answers with the larger group. (If the group is larger than ten, you may want to split into two groups.)

critical links: A professional inquiry process

1A.3

Sharing Perspectives: Who are we as a group?

This first conversation is a "picture in time" of peoples' perspectives about teaching and learning. You will need to find others in the group with whom you can discuss your ideas and questions as you pursue your inquiry study. Consider this first conversation an informal assessment to determine which people share your understanding or perspective about teaching practices.

Five summaries in the resource section contain information about what educational experts believe constitutes good instructional practice or what "quality" teachers should know and be able to do. They include:

- Best Practice Teacher Standard. Developed by the Minnesota Arts Quality Teaching Network
- INTASC Teacher Standard. Developed by the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC)
- Instructional Strategies that Increase Student Learning. From *Classroom Instruction That Works: Research-Based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement* by Robert Marzano, Debra Pickering and Jane Pollock
- National Staff Development Council Standards for Staff Development
- Thirteen Principles of Best Practice. From *Best Practice: New Standards for Teaching and Learning in America's Schools* by Steven Zemelman, Harvey Daniels and Arthur Hyde

These summaries are the texts for this first conversation. The facilitators or the group as a whole may decide to use all of the summaries or select two or three, but you will need to use more than one to get a variety of perspectives.

Take time to review the summaries so they are fresh in your mind just before the conversation begins even if you've read them earlier. The conversation and other activities including the listener summaries and walk and talk should take less than two hours.

The facilitator will give you step by step instructions for having the conversation using "I" statements, assigning listeners who will summarize the conversation, and closing the activity with a paired walk and talk.

critical links: A professional inquiry process

1A.4

Maintaining Community: How do we reconnect at the beginning of each meeting?

Asking participants to respond to a simple question at the "human" rather than "teacher" level is a fast way to reconnect at the beginning of each meeting. The rule, however, is that *everyone* must respond. This does not have to be a time consuming activity. (See facilitator note.)

If your learning community is large (more than five or six people), divide up and answer questions in small groups. Change the small groups each time the community meets so that everyone continues to get to know more colleagues at each meeting. It is not necessary that the community as a whole re-connect at each meeting, only that people come together at a personal level each time they meet.

The list below is a sample of the types of questions your learning community can use once it is established. You may want to pose two or three questions and allow people to answer their favorite. The facilitator notes include another activity for reconnecting called, *If I Were a Song and a Dance*. You may want to use these as examples and create your own activities for reconnecting.

1. What is your favorite art-making activity and why?
2. What is your most memorable art experience as an observer and why?
3. If you could have created any work of art (written a book, composed music, choreographed a dance, painted or sculpted a piece of visual art or designed a building) which one would it be and why?
4. What is your all-time favorite movie and why?
5. If you could *talk* to any person in history, what person would you choose and why?
6. What book or person has had the most impact on your thinking and why?
7. If you could go any place in the world or universe, where would you go and why?
8. How would you go about achieving world peace?
9. If you were president, what would be your first executive order?

critical links: A professional inquiry process

1R.1

Best Practice Teacher Standard:

NOTE: This standard was developed and refined by teachers in the Minnesota Arts State Council and regional Minnesota Arts Quality Teaching Networks. In scope it appears daunting, but is offered as a set of goals to strive toward—the professional development agenda for a teacher’s entire career—rather than a set of requirements.

I. Knowledge of Discipline and Education

The Best Practices teacher understands:

- A. Content and processes of the discipline in which s/he teaches
- B. Learning goals for students required by the school, district and/or state
- C. How the brain learns and implications for classroom teaching and learning
- D. How learning processes are influenced by students' developmental stages and individual differences including:
 - Learning style
 - Gender
 - Interests
 - Culture
 - Abilities
 - Preferences
- E. How support, independence, responsibility and decision-making affect students' learning process
- F. Assessment of student learning and its various purposes
- G. Evaluation of performance aligned with learning goals
- H. Characteristics of optimal learning environments
- J. How various resources and technologies can strengthen and expand learning experiences for students
- K. Strategies for collaboration

II. Skill in Teaching/Instruction

The Best Practices teacher can:

- A. Design challenging learning experiences that engage students in the work of the discipline
- B. Align learning activities with learning goal(s) and content standard(s)
- C. Describe attributes of student response that indicate achievement toward the learning goal
- D. Design learning experiences that bridge current and new knowledge:
 - Provide tools that support the accomplishment of complex tasks
 - Require thinking, foster independence and decision making
 - Are fair, sensitive and accessible to all learners; allow choice, flexibility
 - Incorporate reflection on the learning process
 - Provide structure for questioning current insights

critical links: A professional inquiry process

- Incorporate a system of feedback and guidance
- Rely on varied resources and technologies
- E. Analyze, determine and improve the assessment potential of learning activities and curricular materials
- F. Create new learning activities and assignments that allow for assessment of student learning
- G. Use multiple strategies for observing student response to learning experiences
- H. Use assessment data to:
 - Align instruction, feedback, and guidance with student learning needs
 - Evaluate student performance
- I. Create and maintain a supportive environment for learning
- J. Initiate and engage in constructive dialogue about student learning with colleagues, professionals in the discipline and community members
- K. Engage in collegial collaboration to develop knowledge and competencies for the continual refinement of classroom practice

critical links: A professional inquiry process

1R.2

INTASC Teacher Standard

1. The teacher understands the central concepts, tools of inquiry, and structures of the discipline(s) s/he teaches and can create learning experiences that make these aspects of subject matter meaningful for students.
2. The teacher understands how children learn and develop, and can provide learning opportunities that support their intellectual, social and personal development.
3. The teacher understands how students differ in their approaches to learning, and can create instructional opportunities that are adapted to diverse learners.
4. The teacher understands and uses a variety of instructional strategies to encourage students' development of critical-thinking, problem-solving, and performance skills.
5. The teacher uses an understanding of individual and group motivation and behavior to create a learning environment that encourages positive social interaction, active engagement in learning, and self-motivation.
6. The teacher uses knowledge of effective verbal, nonverbal, and media communication techniques to foster active inquiry, collaboration, and supportive interaction in the classroom.
7. The teacher plans instruction based on knowledge of subject matter, students, the community, and curriculum goals.
8. The teacher understands and uses formal and informal assessment strategies to evaluate and ensure the continuous intellectual, social, and physical development of the learner.
9. The teacher is a reflective practitioner who continually evaluates the effects of his/her choices and action on others (students, parents, and other professionals in the learning community) and who actively seeks out opportunities to grow professionally.
10. The teacher fosters relationships with school colleagues, parents, and agencies in the larger community to support students' learning and well-being.

1R.3

Instructional Strategies That Increase Student Learning

In 2001, Robert Marzano, Debra Pickering and Jane Pollock published *Classroom Instruction that Works: Research-Based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement* (ASCD, Alexandria, VA). Research shows that teachers and the instructional strategies they use are the most significant factors in affecting student learning. The authors describe nine instructional strategies that increase student learning.

1. *IDENTIFYING SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES* is basic to all thought and may be the core of learning. Classifying and creating metaphors or analogies are included in this strategy. The use of Venn diagrams, comparison matrices, and graphic organizers are suggested as tools for identifying similarities and differences.
2. *SUMMARIZING AND NOTE TAKING* are the two most important academic skills. Summarizing requires students to delete some information, keep some information and substitute other information. To make such decisions, students must analyze information at a deep level. Note taking is related to summarization because students must determine what is significant. There is no one correct way to take notes, but several formats including webbing are suggested.
3. *REINFORCING EFFORT AND PROVIDING RECOGNITION* does not address cognitive skills but is aimed at student attitudes and beliefs. Students who understand the relationship between effort and achievement can increase their achievement. Rubrics help students track their effort and evaluate their achievement. A distinction is made between praise and recognition. Recognition is effective when students reach a specific performance level or learning goal.
4. *HOMEWORK AND PRACTICE* should be assigned for specific purposes such as to practice, prepare for new material, or elaborate familiar concepts. Students should know the purpose and the expected outcome. Varying the types of feedback is essential to making homework meaningful. Another concern is for the *proper amount* of homework relative to student age and grade level. Parents should be encouraged to facilitate homework not help or do.
5. *NONLINGUISTIC REPRESENTATIONS* are the mental pictures or physical sensations such as sound, smell, taste, touch and kinesthetic associations. Students who engage in nonlinguistic work have increased brain activity that stimulates deeper learning. Such work includes creating graphic representations, making physical models, generating mental pictures, drawing pictures and pictographs, and engaging in kinesthetic activity.

critical links: A professional inquiry process

6. *COOPERATIVE LEARNING* requires five specific elements to be successful: Positive interdependence; we swim or sink together. Face-to-face interaction; we help each other to learn. Individual and group accountability; each of us must contribute to reach goals. Interpersonal and small group skills; we practice decision making and share leadership. Group processing; we reflect on how well we did and how we could do better. Group sizes should be kept small (3 or 4 students) and should not be ability based. While cooperative learning should not be overused, it is the most powerful of all classroom-grouping strategies.
7. *SETTING OBJECTIVES AND PROVIDING FEEDBACK* encourages a *metacognitive* system of thinking and establishes a direction for student learning. Instructional goals help students focus. Goals should not be too specific, and students should personalize the teacher's instructional goals. The best feedback provides the student with an explanation of when the knowledge or skill is correct and accurate as well as when it is incorrect or inaccurate.
8. *GENERATING AND TESTING HYPOTHESES* is the most powerful of the cognitive operations and requires the application of knowledge. For cognition and application to occur, students must generate and explain their hypotheses and conclusions. Six tasks that require hypothesis generation and testing include system analysis, problem solving, historical investigation, invention, experimental inquiry and decision making.
9. *CUES, QUESTIONS, AND ADVANCE ORGANIZERS* activate prior knowledge. They prepare students for new knowledge before they experience it, which is critical to learning. Questions and cues before the learning experience help students focus on what is important. "Higher level" questions or cues require students to analyze as they learn. Examples of advance organizers include stories to introduce a concept or topic, summaries of information to introduce specific elements of a concept or topic, or graphic organizers such as maps or webs. Skimming a chapter before reading is also an advance organizer strategy.

1R.4

National Staff Development Council Standards

National Staff Development Council Standards for Staff Development
(Revised, 2001)

Context Standards

Staff development that improves the learning of all students:

Organizes adults into learning communities whose goals are aligned with those of the school and district. (Learning Communities)
Requires skillful school and district leaders who guide continuous instructional improvement. (Leadership)
Requires resources to support adult learning and collaboration. (Resources)

Process Standards

Staff development that improves the learning of all students:

Uses disaggregated student data to determine adult learning priorities, monitor progress, and help sustain continuous improvement. (Data-Driven)
Uses multiple sources of information to guide improvement and demonstrate its impact. (Evaluation)
Prepares educators to apply research to decision making. (Research-Based)
Uses learning strategies appropriate to the intended goal. (Design)
Applies knowledge about human learning and change. (Learning)
Provides educators with the knowledge and skills to collaborate. (Collaboration)

Content Standards

Staff development that improves the learning of all students:

Prepares educators to understand and appreciate all students, create safe, orderly and supportive learning environments, and hold high expectations for their academic achievement. (Equity)
Deepen educators' content knowledge, provides them with research-based instructional strategies to assist students in meeting rigorous academic standards, and prepares them to use various types of classroom assessment appropriately. (Quality Teaching)
Provides educators with knowledge and skills to involve families and other stakeholders appropriately. (Family involvement)

1R.5

Thirteen Principles of Best Practice

In 1998, Steven Zemelman, Harvey Daniels and Arthur Hyde published, *Best Practice: New Standards for Teaching and Learning in America's Schools* (Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH). The authors suggest that a new, coherent educational philosophy is reaching across the curriculum and up through the grades. They believe this philosophy embodies best practices in teaching and learning and present thirteen interlocking situations and processes that underlie the movement. The principles with brief explanations are offered below.

1. *STUDENT-CENTERED*: The best starting point for schooling is young people's real interests. Across the curriculum, investigating students' questions should always take precedence over studying arbitrarily and distantly selected content.
2. *EXPERIENTIAL*: Active, hands-on, concrete experience is the most powerful and natural form of learning. Students should be immersed in the most direct possible experience of the content of every subject.
3. *HOLISTIC*: Children learn best when they encounter whole ideas, events, and materials in purposeful contexts, not by studying sub-parts isolated from actual use.
4. *AUTHENTIC*: Real, rich, complex ideas and materials are at the heart of the curriculum. Lessons or textbooks that water-down, control, or over-simplify content ultimately dis-empower students.
5. *EXPRESSIVE*: To fully engage ideas, construct meaning, and remember information, students must regularly employ the whole range of communicative media including speech, writing, drawing, poetry, dance, drama [storytelling], music, movement and visual arts [and visual displays of information including charts, graphs, pictographs and diagrams].
6. *REFLECTIVE*: Immersion in experience and expression must be balanced with opportunities for learners to reflect, debrief, and abstract from the experiences what they have felt, thought and learned.
7. *SOCIAL*: Learning is always socially constructed and often involves social interaction.
8. *COLLABORATIVE*: Cooperative learning activities tap the power of learning better than competitive or individualistic approaches.
9. *DEMOCRATIC*: The classroom is a model community. Students learn what they live as citizens of the school.

critical links: A professional inquiry process

10. *COGNITIVE:* The most powerful learning comes when children develop true understanding of concepts through higher-order thinking associated with inquiry and self-monitoring of their thought process. (For one example of higher-order thinking skills, see Marzano's *Dimensions of Learning*.)

11. *DEVELOPMENTAL:* Children grow through a series of definable but not rigid stages. Educational institutions should align their activities to the developmental level of students.

12. *CONSTRUCTIVIST:* Children do not just receive content; in a very real sense they re-create and reinvent meaning for every system they encounter including language and mathematics. Teachers need to provide activities and interactions that structure or scaffold learning so students can create meaning in incremental segments.

13. *CHALLENGING:* Students learn best when faced with genuine challenges, choices, and responsibility for their own learning.