

**Leading Deep Conversations in Collaborative Inquiry Groups:
Adaptation of the Original Article by the Authors**

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Leading Deep Conversations in Collaborative Inquiry Groups

Engaging in substantive and specific dialogue about teaching and learning is uncommon in U.S. schools. Teachers in the U.S. have little time to engage in professional dialogue; times when teachers do come together are most commonly staff meetings, professional development events, and hurried lunch breaks. In these venues, information may be shared and ideas elicited, but dialogue about the specifics of teachers' practices as connected to what students know and can do is not typical. Alternately, collaborative inquiry groups (such as PLCs, critical friends groups, and lesson study groups) involve educators in a cycle of inquiry where they develop a shared vision for student learning and use various forms of student data to identify gaps between this vision and students' learning. Based on their analysis, teachers identify a specific and narrow inquiry focus (e.g., improving students' abilities to interpret data from scientific experiments), make changes in classroom practices, and collect and analyze classroom-based data to examine impacts on student learning. These findings inform further actions for a cycle of continuous improvement. Critical to the impact of collaborative inquiry groups on improving student learning is teachers' willingness to engage in conversations that are less about sharing activities, information, and student anecdotes and more about raising and pursuing questions about learning goals, instructional practices, and all students' attainment of their agreed-upon goals. Facilitating these conversations is often dependent upon the teachers themselves, as the funding for or availability of knowledgeable external facilitators is rare.

PLCs have become more and more common in school districts across the U.S. and around the world. As professional development providers and researchers, we are interested in understanding how teacher groups might learn to have what Himley calls "deep talk":

Essentially this kind of talk asks participants to engage in a process of collaboratively generated meaning that takes place over a relatively long period of time . . . this reflective or descriptive process enables participants to see and re-see that shared focus of interest in view of an ever-enlarging web of comments, tensions, connections, connotations, differences, oppositions. (quoted in Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1999, 280)

To better understand the support teacher leaders need in this area, we partnered with PLC lead teachers as co-researchers. The repeated impasses they faced when trying to shift PLC conversations from a form of polite sharing of teaching strategies (congenial talk) to deeper

conversations about teaching-learning connections (collegial talk) became very apparent to us as participant observers in their collaborative inquiry groups.

[We are] struggling with having professional inquiry discussions ... getting in deep.

Sometimes, it's like there is just a resistance to want to dig deep professionally into these issues.

This comment reflected the frustration of the leader of a middle school science PLC with her group's tendency to detour away from critical discussions about their students' abilities to write scientific conclusions. Even when teachers were committed to the idea of examining student thinking to better understand the impacts of specific instructional actions, critical questioning and substantive explorations of the status quo tended to be avoided. Conversations more often reflected the characteristics of congeniality than those characterized by a collegial, inquiry-based stance (see Figure 1).

In the following, we discuss what we have come to understand about the discursive challenges in enacting collaborative teacher inquiry and offer ideas that can help collaborative groups move to more substantive dialogue.

Congenial Conversations and the Avoidance of Conflict

When teachers come together for collaborative inquiry, there are at least two attributes that hinder deep conversation—a traditional school culture of congeniality and teachers' inexperience with collegial, evidence-based dialogue.

Congenial school cultures (Lieberman and Miller 2008) preserve the status quo. Norms of privacy, long established as part of school culture, are protected when teachers avoid asking each other questions that probe into the nature of what students learn as a result of specific instructional practices. Probing another's ideas and actions surfaces differences in beliefs and values and can lead to personal and emotional conflicts. These conflicts are non-productive and can generate mistrust and fear that leads to resistance toward collaborative inquiry (Uline, Tschannen-Moran, and Perez 2003). To avoid these emotional or affective conflicts, teachers often work hard to maintain congenial conversations characterized by generalities about instructional practices and assertions about student learning that are unsupported by empirical evidence.

For example, in a PLC focused on improving students' use of scientific vocabulary in class discussions, each teacher may share his or her strategy for teaching new vocabulary. Each

person can privately judge this strategy against their beliefs about learning and teaching and decide whether to adopt, adapt, or reject the strategy offered. Technical questions may be asked, such as how often or at what point in a new unit this approach is implemented. More critical questions about how this approach impacts students' understandings or what evidence the teacher has to support a claim of effectiveness are avoided. Someone in the group may not even agree that teaching vocabulary should be the group's focus, but goes along with the decision to avoid conflict. As a result, everyone remains friendly but little is accomplished with respect to substantively improving teaching and learning. Shifting from these congenial but relatively superficial conversations to dialogue that is more productive for improving student learning entails risk-taking and trust.

Learning How to Foster Collegial Conversations

While some people have a natural inclination toward asking questions that help a group get beyond a superficial sharing of ideas, it is a rare group that is characterized by this practice. Yet, productive collaborative inquiry is characterized by a willingness to investigate teaching-learning connections and identify and negotiate differences and similarities in beliefs about what constitutes good teaching and meaningful learning. Skilled leaders can facilitate groups in the use of collaborative norms, protocols, and group-generated sets of questions (see Table 1) that build the group's capacity for using conflicting views as starting points for developing shared meanings. When teachers approach conflict as an intellectual challenge rather than an affective or emotional event, differences generate deeper inquiry and professional learning as opposed to threats to professional identity.

Intentional and transparent steps are needed to shift from congenial to collegial conversations. Just as teachers must constantly model and discuss what they expect their students to do, teacher leaders need to model strategies for productive conversations and help the group reflect on the results. One strategy is to distinguish between what Garmston and Wellman (1999) designate as "dialogue" and "discussion." *Dialogue* occurs when people actively try to understand others' meanings by asking questions, posing counter-examples, and suspending judgment; Wells (1999) calls this a "willingness to wonder." *Discussion* comes after exploratory dialogue and people are ready to advocate for an idea and come to a decision for action.

Naming the type of conversation that is needed helps a group set expectations for the meeting. For example, when teachers are wondering about what might be the best way to assess

students' understandings about a given concept, the *dialogue* might entail exploring questions such as, "What do we expect students to say?" "Are there different ways students might express their understanding?" or "What are different ways of eliciting students' ideas?" The expected outcome would relate to a richer understanding of the learning expectations and varied assessment opportunities. At some point the exploration needs to shift to making a decision about what will be done. Then the group employs *discussion* by explicitly stating that the next desired outcome is to decide upon the assessment tool and when teachers will conduct the assessment. The conversation may entail some cognitive conflict, as people make cases for different approaches. Because these differences were previously examined, the decision is based not on personal attachments to particular strategies but a clear understanding of the pros and cons of each choice.

Whereas congenial conversations are characterized by conflict avoidance and reassurances that activities and problems are normal, collegial conversations are distinguished by "honest talk" (Lieberman and Miller 2008) and "consequential conversations" (Little & Horn 2006). Because it does often feel risky to open one's practice to scrutiny, explicit attention to collaborative norms can contribute to an environment of trust and respect (Garmston and Wellman 1999). These norms help foster an inquiry stance, where uncertainty furthers inquiry rather than fears that one will be judged incompetent. As one teacher stated, "The idea here is that we can talk about whatever we need to talk about in our classrooms . . . and not feel like I'm going to get someone knocking on my door saying, 'I hear you stink as a teacher.'"

A shift from congenial to collegial conversations can also be supported by using protocols that provide processes for eliciting ideas and feedback from all group members. Formal protocols (see <http://www.nsrffharmony.org/protocols.html>) can support the potentially risky business of collaboratively examining students' work and relating this to instruction (as opposed to anecdotal stories of student achievement). However, if group members are not giving explicit attention to the nature of their conversational interactions as described above, then simply following the steps of a protocol will do little to support honest dialogue about important questions.

Another possibility is for teacher groups to generate a set of questions that can be posted and referenced to stimulate deeper discussion (see Table 1). Teacher leaders can model using these questions by deliberately referring to the list and selecting an appropriate question. The

collectively generated and publicly displayed list sets up the potential for a culture of inquiry, where any group member can pose a question to influence the nature of the conversation. There is great potential for these questions to shift a conversation from simply sharing stories of practice to questioning the reasons for-impacts of instructional actions and using classroom-based data to respond to those questions. One successful strategy for motivating the use of conversational protocols is to have the group reflect on their processes and progress at the end of the meeting in order to recognize whether the group is having consequential conversations that make a difference or not.

Energizing Shared Leadership for Deep Conversations about Teaching and Learning

While there are no quick fixes for increasing the depth of dialogue in collaborative teacher inquiry groups, teacher leadership is a critical factor. Much faith is being put into the power of professional collaboration to positively impact teaching and learning. Yet the challenges of collaborative inquiry are well-documented (McLaughlin and Talbert 2006). Due to the twin constraints of money and expertise, few teacher groups have access to sustained external facilitation. The teachers most invested in these collaborative processes are themselves trying to figure out how to lead their colleagues into deep and productive conversations. Key elements to breaking the habit of congenial conversation include the support and engagement of all group members in:

- asking and answering probing questions about the reasons for, impacts of, and evidence that supports implementing specific instructional decisions;
- recognizing the value of cognitive conflict as a way to gain a deeper understanding about the complexities of teaching and learning;
- being intentional about and accountable for the nature of the dialogue in collaborative group work; and,
- accessing and using tools (e.g., protocols and question prompts) to support a shift from congenial to collegial conversations.

Individual teacher leaders have an important role in guiding their groups' conversations toward substantive and specific dialogue about teaching and learning. However, if these shifts in teacher talk are to be made and sustained at the school level, all teachers must contribute to deep conversations grounded in a cycle of questioning, reflecting on evidence, and taking action.

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Table 1

Sample Question Sets for Framing Deeper Conversations in Teacher Inquiry Groups

Examining Instructional Practices

- Why are these meaningful learning goals?
- Which students were/were not engaged in the lesson? What might explain that?
- If we all teach this concept differently, what implications are there for student understanding of (related vocabulary, processes, subsequent concept building)?
- How do these lessons address students' misconceptions?

Learning Expectations Represented in Student Work

- When students understand this, what will it sound or look like?
- What are our expectations for struggling students? For advanced students?
- What are misconceptions we might expect to see in students' work?
- What other ways might students represent their understandings?

Identifying Patterns in Student Work

- What do you see or hear that suggests students understand /almost understand/do not understand?
- Which students are understanding/almost understanding/not understanding? What does that tell us?
- What do you see or hear that you did not expect to find?

Connecting Student Work to Practice

- How do students' responses relate to the lesson taught?
- Why did I/you teach it this way? Are there other options? Why consider another option?
- What patterns in students' work suggest I/we should continue what teaching this way, make some modifications, or try to use a different approach?

Examining Assessment Practices

- What does this form of assessment show us?
- What information about students' understandings does this assessment not provide?
- What are alternative forms of assessments that might reveal more/other/all students' understandings?

Reflection on Group Processes

- What does this conversation lead us to do next?
- Do I/we understand students' thinking in a new way? How?
- Do we need outside help with anything? What?
- How did our conversation challenge me? Make me uncomfortable? What did I like? What don't I want to repeat?
- Do we need a tool to guide the way we talk about (assessment, student learning, teaching) next time?

Figure 1.

Collegial

Is Driven By:

Engaging in cognitive conflict for deeper understanding & productive decisions

Is Characterized By:

An Inquiry Stance

Asking questions & wanting deeper understanding about kids' thinking, content expectations, teaching practices & general terms like "discovery learning," "mastery" or "my kids got it." (See Table 1)

The Co-Construction of Meaning

- Designing a lesson or assessment together
- Collaboratively analyzing student work
- Clarifying meaning of learning goals or standards

Is Organized By:

Dialogue

Questions drive cognitive conflict, ideas, expectations, decisions, practices. Data are examined and cross-examined in an effort to make more informed decisions about practice, assessments, expectations.

Discussion

- Making decisions based on a long-term timeframe and a sense of learning from the inquiry process
- Moving on in the inquiry process based on what is learned from data & dialogue
- Acknowledging the pros and cons of different options without waiting for the perfect option

Congenial

Is Driven By:

Preserving harmony and avoiding affective conflict

- Not undermining another's professionalism by challenging beliefs, ideas, or assumptions. Not asking, "Do you think kids really understand when [they just memorize words]?"
- Not putting teachers on the spot by asking probing questions such as, "Why do you do it that way?" or "What are you trying to get from kids?"
- Not intruding on another's professional space by thinking, "She'll do it her way, I'll do it mine."
- Assuming we understand each other & agree with each other. Not clarifying when we say, "mastery," "discovery learning," "these kids got it."
- Avoiding raising sources of conflict & thinking, "I'm not even going to ask about that!"
- "Agree to disagree" rather than trying to better understand the qualities of the disagreement
- Sharing ideas without examining ideas: "That's a good idea!"