

Teachers Talking Together: The Power of Professional Community

by Linda Nathan

Schools that encourage teachers to do excellent work, as Boston Arts Academy (BAA) does, are “professional learning communities.” A professional learning community exists when the entire faculty and staff, including the administration, work together towards a shared set of standards and assessments that are known to everyone, including the students. Such a school is a learning environment not only for the students, but for all the adults, who never feel that they have “got it right,” that no more learning as an educator is necessary. Standards and assessments are continually retooled as teachers and students become more proficient. A school that is also a professional learning community recognizes that work with students and adults is on-going and embodies the values of continual growth, risk-taking and trust. Certainly, teachers have opportunities to learn content, but the ways and conditions that teachers learn both individually and together, share their practices, and even disagree are the characteristics that constitute a vibrant learning community.

When I had the chance to open BAA, I felt that the experience of all teachers teaching a core class would benefit from the development of our professional learning community. This was based on previous such work that I helped lead at Boston’s Fenway High School, with which we currently share a building. In the spring

The Boston Arts Academy, a Pilot School within the Boston Public Schools, is a laboratory and a beacon for artistic and academic innovation. The Boston Arts Academy prepares a diverse community of 435 aspiring artist-scholars to be successful in their college or professional careers and to be engaged members of a democratic society.



before BAA officially opened with students, we had a series of meetings with a range of participants – artists, academics, community members, parents, and college students. We asked the same question at each meeting: “What should BAA graduates know and be able to do?” Although a range of answers always surfaced, there was always one common response: “BAA graduates have to know how to write a grant. Artists live and die by grants.” That was our motivation to begin our schoolwide approach to writing. Teaching writing would be the foundation of our own professional learning community.

We decided that all teachers would co-teach a writing seminar and all students would take it at the same time of the day. Co-teaching would create a natural pairing for professional development partners. Teachers would observe one another in writing class and then also in the teacher’s primary subject area. Through this writing class, we would build a common vocabulary for teaching writing that would permeate all of our classes. We incorporated an acronym from other educators called “MEAL” – main idea, evidence, analysis, link – that provides students with a formula for writing a paragraph or the famed five-paragraph essay for our state’s standardized test. Seminar became the place to develop and practice a schoolwide approach to teaching and assessment.

Under the guidance of our Curriculum Coordinator, Anne Clark, our grade level writing seminar class became the central place for professional development. Ms. Clark was our resident literacy “expert,” and knew all the current educational literature about how to improve students’ literacy skills. Her job was to plan lessons with and for teachers; watch teachers teach and then give critical feedback, and teach a particular lesson or skill that a teacher felt unsure about introducing. She was always open and eager to have teachers critique her as well.

Ms. Clark convened and led discussions about seminar so we could create a schoolwide rubric (or list of criteria) for judging good writing, and also connect that rubric to our Habits of the Graduate, which we call RICO (Refine, Invent, Connect, and Own). She provided examples of good student writing so that we could agree on what constituted proficient writing. By scoring student writing individually as teachers, as co-teaching pairs, and finally as grade-level teams, we developed shared teacher accountability, which meant that we had to learn to question one another if one teacher gave a student a very high grade on the writing rubric and another did not. It wasn’t fair to students if a teaching pair didn’t share similar views on what constituted good writing. We spent many hours collaboratively grading work and then discussing why we had given a certain grade. Over time, we reached consensus.

Our original premise, which I think still holds true, was that it is less threatening for teachers to develop a set of shared expectations and practices for a course that everyone teaches but that is no one’s primary content area. Very few of us were writing experts. What mattered for our students’ success was that we all grew to share a similar philosophy and understanding of what constituted good work in writing and how to teach the necessary skills. Because of this intense working together for writing seminar, we became able to transfer these skills to other content areas. For example, all BAA classes now use a MEAL format for writing a short essay. Questions about how we would reflect RICO in the writing portfolio became relevant for assessment discussions in other subjects. By having a school-wide discussion related to assessment in writing, we were learning at the same time how to have that discussion in many other areas.

Now that we had a structure around which to build our professional community, we could explore what that community could do. We found that it allowed us to do several distinct things: as well as developing a shared accountability system, we could diagnose our students’ weaknesses, as well as the gaps in our own teaching; we learned to critique one another’s practice; and we found ways to get to know our students beyond the classroom.

Habits of the Graduate: RICO

The Boston Arts Academy Habits of the Graduate are akin to the “Habits of Mind” described by the educational philosopher John Dewey; they are the orientation towards learning that we wish our graduates to demonstrate. These habits also form an intellectual framework that our students and staff use in every classroom, arts and academic. They represent the best aspects of both the artistic and academic processes. We sometimes refer to them by the acronym “RICO”: Refine, Invent, Connect, and Own.

Refine: Have I conveyed my message? What are my strengths and weaknesses?

Invent: What makes this work inventive? Do I take risks and push myself?

Connect: Who is the audience and how does the work connect? What is the context?

Own: Am I proud of the work I am doing? What do I need to be successful?

As we scored student work together, and team-taught in writing seminar, we also identified skills that we needed to further develop as teachers. BAA students’ arts auditions for admission are academically blind, and as a result, we have a very broad range of students in our classrooms. Many have learning disabilities and receive special education services. Others, even though they don’t have a diagnosed disability, also struggle to complete assignments and come to us reading two to four grades below average. Still others are reading at the college level. Early on, we recognized that we needed to improve our teachers’ skills to teach effectively in heterogeneous classrooms without either boring our highly skilled students or frustrating students challenged by learning issues.

We put a number of initiatives in place simultaneously. Friday faculty meetings are primarily for professional development. We read texts together that expand our understanding of terms such as “differentiated instruction,” “heterogeneous groupings,” or “socio-cultural-linguistic influences on literacy development.” We debate whether and how what we read would work in our particular classroom settings. We also discuss our own classroom experiences, often by sharing our written observations of one another. At certain points in the year, we share and critique one another’s practices in more in-depth ways. This is always a favorite opportunity for teachers to discuss a practice that has been particularly successful or one for which they need their colleagues’ critical appraisal. Together, we

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Related Resource

For more on Anne Clark's work at Boston Arts Academy, please see "Inclusion Research at Work at Boston Arts Academy," which she wrote for *Horace* Volume 21, Issue 2, Winter 2005, available online at www.essentialschools.org/cs/resources/view/ces_res/358.

develop and refine strategies such as "Open Honors," which is our way of addressing the needs of both struggling and more skilled students within one class: together teachers develop lessons and assignments that will stretch some of the students to do more and deeper honors work while maintaining the base-line standard for everyone else. "Open Honors" is still a work in progress for BAA, but we feel it's worth the effort to develop different and more complex levels of assignments and different quantities of work to further challenge some students.

Students who are poor readers are the least likely to be successful in school, and we were determined to improve reading fluency and comprehension for all our students. We brought in an expert reading teacher to teach a graduate level class for all staff during faculty meeting time. It was important that all teachers participate in this experience. Improving our students' reading skills could not just be the responsibility of

the English teachers; that responsibility had to be shared by all teachers. We have learned how to take a text, whether in science or music history, and figure out its level of reading difficulty, and we have learned how to adapt a college level text to a ninth grade reading level.

In addition, we developed a summer school reading course for students who were two or more years behind in their grade level equivalency. This course provides time for teachers to practice intensively with a small group of students under the guidance of our expert reading specialist the theories that had been taught during the year. Before they enter the program, students are given a diagnostic reading test: at the end of the program they are re-tested to measure their growth. In an effort to tailor the program to meet individual student needs as much as possible, students are grouped by reading level.

Each day after the reading class, teachers come together and discuss activities and lessons. Sometimes teachers share video clips of their instruction. The reading specialist observes classes as well. Music, math and English teachers who have worked in the summer program have said they feel inspired by their new found skills and realize that they can now infuse concrete reading strategies into their classes during the regular school year. The summer reading program has allowed us to slow down and work in a very focused

BAA Math Team's Tuning Protocol

It is not always easy for teachers to reach consensus on content (what students are learning) and assessment (how students are doing). Often it means that a teacher has to give up a favorite lesson, project, or reading for the sake of a cohesive team. Every few years, our math team has conducted an exercise that is called a "tuning protocol." Essentially, this is an opportunity for teachers of one content area to come together and ask large questions about what they are teaching and how they are teaching. As part of the progression, the teachers describe the decisions they have made to teach particular content in a certain way. Done well, a tuning protocol is a process of laying one's practice open for others to critique, much like the experience our students have in their Sophomore Reviews. The team values the feedback of outside educators who come from both math and other disciplines to participate in the protocol. But more important than the external review is the internal accountability that occurs between colleagues. As teachers prepare for the actual event, they create

poster boards that describe the courses they teach through student work, various assignments, syllabi, and other representations to give the viewer a sense of the depth and breadth of the class. In this way, teachers begin to make visible and public their own teaching. Colleagues begin to see where Math 1, for example, links to Math 2 and where Math 3 might repeat topics already covered in Math 2. Thus, teachers are "tuning" their practice and making decisions about what to keep and what to jettison in terms of curriculum and assessment.

Related Resource

For more on Boston Arts Academy's mathematics curriculum development work, please see BAA math teacher Mark Lonergan's "The Case for Creativity in Math Education," featured in *Horace* Volume 23, Issue 1.

and individual way on student skill development. Most important, many students jump nearly a grade level in the intensive four-week course.

We have spent, and continue to spend, professional time together to better understand the difference between functional and cultural literacy. While it is important to understand the phonemic structures of reading, and where students with poor skills may stumble, teachers also must understand, as Paulo Freire so aptly describes in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, how cultural literacy can increase reading skills. However, promoting cultural literacy does not only mean finding texts that directly connect to students' own experiences; rather, it entails finding methods of teaching so that Aristotle and Shakespeare and Oscar Wilde connect to students' experiences. This is not a simple task. We were determined not to fall prey to the practice often seen in schools with poor readers where students are only given texts from their own cultural backgrounds. BAA students who had never heard of the Ancient Greeks began to spout Aristotle and Sophocles as if they were friends from around the corner. This meant that we were grappling successfully with how to teach difficult texts.

Related Resource

Linda Nathan wrote about creating equity at Boston Arts Academy in *Horace* Volume 19, Issue 3. "Creating Equity from the Ground Up," which can be found online at www.essentialschools.org/cs/resources/view/ces_res/298.

This is not an easy process. Nonetheless, I maintain that if school leaders can hold steadfastly to strategies that increase trust and risk-taking among teachers, while simultaneously increasing teachers' technical skills and overall pedagogy, professional learning communities can emerge and be sustained. The struggle is maintaining individual teacher skill enhancement while also instituting practices such as school wide professional development goals and peer observations that will increase the trust between teachers that we have learned is essential.

All schools, particularly secondary schools, would do well to consider what kinds of school-wide courses and experiences they could offer that could be taught by all teachers in order to build a professional learning community. It doesn't have to be a writing or social issues course. Many schools are now broken into Small Learning Communities, many of which are organized around particular themes such as media, technology or health. If these Small Learning Communities could institute a core course that is

taken by all students and taught and discussed by all faculty, then improvements in student achievement might be more evident. The key is for every school to find its own solution for how teachers can effectively create and sustain a professional learning community.

There is a real danger that the weight of the logistics of just "doing school" will prevent teachers and leaders from stopping to ask the hard questions that are necessary for the creation and survival of a professional learning community. There is so much pressure from school districts to answer the demands of standardized test data and to improve student scores by nearly "any means necessary." Many schools provide time for teachers to see which problems students got wrong on a variety of standardized measures, but the time to ask why students made those errors is never sufficient. "Why" questions are usually more complicated, more nuanced, and may require different strategies to reach those students. Too often we succumb to that pressure of time and just deal with the "what" questions. But if we are committed to raising student achievement, pushing ourselves to keep asking better and more complex questions is essential to a healthy school.

Many friendships and emotional connections arise among teachers. These are important, but they do not substitute for necessary professional support and growth. Teachers must have structured time to share, write, and talk about their teaching and their students. Otherwise, teaching is a solitary activity, all too often leading to unsatisfactory results for both teachers and students. A school with a healthy professional learning community will maintain a razor-sharp focus on student achievement; its faculty will feel a common ownership and responsibility for that achievement; and its students will achieve success.

Linda Nathan is the founding headmaster of the Boston Arts Academy, the city's first and only public high school for the visual and performing arts. Under her leadership, the school has won state, national, and international recognition. Linda is a lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education where she teaches a course titled "Building Democratic Schools." She is also currently writing a book about urban education and the arts, from which this article was adapted.