

The Year We Learned to Collaborate

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At this school in Mexico, teachers became critical friends who enhanced one another's teaching practice.

Every school has watershed moments that mark a distinction between past and present practices. For Colegio Inglés, a private, bilingual preK–9 school outside Monterrey, Mexico, 2008–09 became a watershed school year. That year, teachers and administrators embarked on a collaborative professional development initiative precipitated by a collision of challenges.

A Cordial Community Steps Up

Our first challenge surfaced in spring 2008. A survey to assess teachers' perceptions of Colegio Inglés as a professional learning community showed dismaying results. Many faculty members perceived they were working in an environment of cynicism, grievances, and distrust between administrators and teachers. Others saw the school as a congenial community because teachers celebrated birthdays and marriages and supported one another's personal struggles. However, few teachers thought Colegio Inglés was the accountable professional community that the school was aspiring to become. The desire to preserve cordial relationships meant that faculty members generally avoided professional confrontations. Also missing were peer observations, which would permit novice teachers to learn from experienced colleagues and show experienced faculty that new teachers often offer innovative strategies and facility with technology.

Second, we realized that many of our teachers would soon need help preparing to implement a new math program. Our school serves 1,700 students in four divisions: preschool, lower elementary, upper elementary, and middle school. In both elementary divisions, math instruction had always been teacher- and textbook-centered. In contrast, the math program to be rolled out that fall used no textbooks. Students were expected to construct knowledge and acquire skills through interactions with classmates, manipulatives, and data.

As Colegio Inglés administrators, we knew teachers would need more than a one-day workshop to successfully adopt and sustain the student-centered focus this curriculum required. But the current professional environment—congenial at best, toxic at worst—was hardly conducive to a fundamental transformation in teaching practice.

So we faced a question: What sort of professional development could both strengthen a hesitant learning community and motivate teachers to commit to the daunting task of transforming their practice? Although the faculty enjoyed traditional activities like workshops and study groups, these practices had failed to produce the professional collaboration and innovations in practice that the coming school year would require.

Our professional reading led us to a professional development model produced by the Boston Plan for Excellence (Platt, Tripp, Fraser, Warnock, & Curtis, 2008). In the collaborative coaching and learning model, teachers and administrators collaborate to determine a yearlong focus for a school's learning and teaching and to plan lessons related to this focus. Teachers demonstrate those lessons, observe one another's demonstrations, and debrief the lessons using a protocol. The model's collaborative components and focus on instruction would move the school closer to becoming an accountable professional learning community. Its ongoing nature would support elementary teachers as they progressively adopted and refined the student-centered methodology of the new math program. We debated whether to limit this experience of building a learning community to the elementary teachers involved in the math program. However, we'd tried professional development efforts in a fragmented way in the past, with scant success. We ultimately decided to involve 72 homeroom teachers and 18 teacher aides, preschool through middle school, in this model during the 2008–09 school year. Teachers adopting the new math curriculum were required to participate. We have since expanded the program; 110 of our 140 teachers take part.

Snapshot of Collaborative Coaching

To implement collaborative coaching, school administrators set up some basics at the start of each school year, and then teachers tackle their own learning through demonstration lessons as the year unfolds. Before school opens, administrators determine and share with teachers a focus for the year's collaborative learning. In choosing the focus, they consider the goals of each school division (preschool through middle); any new programs the school will implement; and best-practice guidelines.

The main administrators of each school division assumed responsibility as collaborative coaching coordinators. They scheduled pre-observations, demonstration lessons, and debriefings for each teacher in the division who participates in collaborative coaching. These sessions are scheduled throughout the school year.

Grade-level (preschool and elementary) or subject-area (middle school) peers collaborate on designing the demonstration lesson, using their common planning time. The demonstrating teacher shares a draft of the plan with peers, who review it and provide input. Administrators are welcome to join this pre-observation planning. Some do, but others believe it's important for teachers to acquire confidence in their own ability to design instruction.

To get a sense of the changes to teaching practice that these observations and debriefings generate, consider how each step in the process played out for Clara, a 4th grade teacher at Colegio Inglés.

Pre-observation Planning: Help from Clara's Friends

In September, Clara received the schedule of all the 4th grade collaborative coaching and learning appointments for the entire school year. Her own planning session and demonstration lesson were set for early October. Because Clara was a second-year teacher, her sessions would take place early in the school year so that novice teachers would have the benefit of observing her planning and instruction and her response to feedback during debriefing. Looking ahead in her math curriculum, Clara decided to prepare a demonstration lesson in geometry. As her pre-observation planning session approached, Clara prepared a draft of a lesson plan teaching students to find the volume of a cube. At the planning session, she shared it with her five 4th grade colleagues and her coordinator. A novice teacher, Victor, suggested that Clara begin her lesson by reviewing some of the key math vocabulary she would be using. Marta, a highly experienced colleague, anticipated that students might have difficulty with the workbook problems that Clara was planning to assign to student pairs. She recommended that Clara demonstrate the first problem for the class before assigning the rest. Because all the teachers would eventually be teaching this lesson, they were trying to visualize its implementation in their own classrooms.

Clara asked colleagues to closely observe two situations that concerned her. She had paired Esteban, who was struggling with geometry, with Jorge, a strong student, expecting that Jorge would share his mathematical thinking with his peer. Clara asked her group to listen to their conversation to determine whether Esteban was benefiting from this match.

Clara's second concern involved student engagement. Some students' attention, she believed, wandered whenever she called on a classmate. Clara asked teachers to observe students' behavior when a peer was speaking and suggest strategies for keeping all learners on task.

Clara's Demonstration Lesson

On the morning of her demonstration lesson, Clara adjusted her classroom layout to accommodate 10 chairs for the observers: her five fellow 4th grade teachers and five administrators. During instruction, observers generally complete a standard form, noting warm (positive) and cool (critically constructive) feedback. If an opportunity arises, observers interact with students to check their understanding of tasks, skills, or concepts. Although they pay particular attention to the collaborative coaching focus, observers also notice general teaching practice and procedures.

Clara, a yoga enthusiast, began her lesson by leading students in deep breathing exercises, which seemed to calm her group. She then dictated a series of multiplication fact problems, which students recorded in their notebooks.

Clara challenged them to solve the problems in one minute. At the end of the time limit, Clara called on students to give the answers. They each counted their correct responses and highlighted their errors. Students were fully

engaged in this practice, quietly celebrating correct answers or frowning at mistakes. The lesson moved on to flash cards displaying relevant math vocabulary. To further check understanding, Clara showed students a number of objects, asking them to decide whether these things were cubes and to justify their decisions.

Clara used the overhead projector to display the pattern of a box which, when folded, would produce a three-centimeter cube. She asked students to figure out how many one-centimeter cubes the box would hold, suggesting that they use drawings to find the answer. All students launched into the task. Observers noted, however, that some were struggling to find the volume or even make sense of the pattern. These students looked at their neighbors' notebooks, asked neighbors for help, initiated unrelated conversations with other confused students, or sat idle. Clara circulated, trying to guide students who were experiencing difficulty with the task, but much off-task behavior continued.

After about 10 minutes, Clara asked for volunteers to tell the volume of the box and explain how they'd found the answer. Students then worked in pairs to examine several box patterns and find the volume of each. As Clara gave students directions, observers listened for their clarity and precision. Several observers watched Esteban and Jorge. Jorge had sketched each cube as three-dimensional layers and was showing Esteban how to count the cubic units, helping him visualize both the interior and exterior of the cubes. In response to an observer's question, Esteban explained, "You have to count all the little cubes in each layer to get the volume of the big cube." Clearly, Clara had shown good judgment in pairing these boys.

Clara concluded the lesson by asking for volunteers to present their methods for finding the volume of a cube. As two pairs demonstrated their correct strategies, quite a few students were covertly talking or horsing around.

Debriefing: A Close Look at Practice

Clara and her observers met for a 40-minute debriefing the day of the lesson. Observers brought their notes. Clara came prepared to record their feedback and suggestions, and one of the school's substitutes took notes, which the elementary coordinator would later send to attendees. We use an adapted tuning protocol (National School Reform Faculty, n.d.) for debriefings, which involves four steps.

1. *Clarifying Questions (5 minutes)*. Observers ask the demonstrating teacher factual questions that focus on specific elements of instruction. For instance, an administrator asked Clara whether she checked students' notebooks to monitor their mastery of multiplication facts. Clara confirmed that she did, adding that by highlighting their errors, students signaled to her which multiplication facts she needs to include in future practice. Once clarifying questions are addressed, the demonstrating teacher moves to a seat apart from the group.

2. *Warm Feedback (15 minutes)*. Observers share and discuss positive feedback while the demonstrating teacher listens and takes notes without responding. As observers comment, they address only other observers, referring to the demonstrating teacher in third person, as if he or she were not present. This was challenging for teachers at first. "At the beginning it felt uncomfortable to talk about the demonstrating teacher when she was in the room," explains Adriana, a Colegio Inglés teacher. "But after having this experience, that's the part I like best, hearing the warm and cool feedback."

Once the floor was opened for warm feedback, a 4th grade teacher commented that the deep breathing exercises had both calmed students and focused their attention on Clara as she began the lesson. Another teacher mentioned that perhaps Clara would demonstrate the exercises for her colleagues so they could all try this technique.

The elementary-level principal praised Clara's decision to pair Esteban with Jorge: "When Jorge deconstructed the cubes into layers, that gave Esteban a more concrete understanding of cubic units. Esteban might well apply this deconstruction process to further geometry lessons."

3. *Cool Feedback (15 minutes)*. As observers share and discuss their more critical feedback, the demonstrating teacher again listens without responding. Observers speak respectfully and accompany all critiques with suggestions. Although it may seem unusual, even unfair, to exclude the demonstrating teacher from the discussion, this makes for a powerful learning experience. Unable to offer immediate justification for his or her actions, the demonstrating

teacher must instead reflect on observers' perceptions and consider the possibility that students may share these views.

Feedback discussions are also valuable opportunities for administrators to listen to faculty's observations. Teachers who comment on superficial elements of instruction may need more intensive professional guidance. Those whose feedback reflects increasing insight into the complexities of instruction are demonstrating professional growth. On the whole, our faculty has become impressively perceptive as we've used this protocol.

Several observers commented on Clara's tendency to call only on students who raised their hands. Marta thought this might account for some of the off-task behavior; students had learned that they wouldn't be held accountable for learning if they didn't volunteer responses. One teacher recommended that Clara develop a system for calling on students randomly or strategically. Another added that the solution to a math problem can often be distributed among several students, with each learner explaining one step in the process, so students have to listen to classmates' responses.

In sharing their notes, observers realized that several student pairs had added the areas of each side of the cubes and identified the sums as the volumes. In contrast, students who arrived at the correct answer had envisioned the cubes as layers, as evidenced by their drawings. An administrator conjectured that the class would have benefited from viewing a concrete model of a cube composed of smaller cubic units before progressing to the practice problems. Clara could have constructed and deconstructed such a model, reinforcing the three-dimensional nature of the figure and stimulating students' mathematical thinking.

4. Teacher's Response and Follow-Up. When Clara rejoined the group for debriefing, she thanked everyone for their comments, including the cool feedback. Clara confessed to being reluctant to pressure students to participate in class but recognized that calling on students who had not volunteered responses would likely reduce off-task behavior. She liked the idea of involving several students in explaining the process of solving one math problem.

Clara had also noticed that some students were finding the area of the sides of the cubes instead of their volumes; nevertheless, it hadn't occurred to her that they weren't transitioning well from two-dimensional to three-dimensional thinking. She agreed that a demonstration of the concept of volume using three-dimensional materials would solidify their understanding, and she committed to trying this.

As follow-up, the coordinator provides the demonstrating teacher any necessary support and monitors his or her progress in incorporating those suggestions she has committed to trying. The elementary coordinator asked Clara for a list of the feedback suggestions she intended to incorporate into her teaching and supported Clara in doing so throughout the year.

New Trust and Comfort

Collaborative coaching and learning has gained wide acceptance among faculty members. On a recent survey of 90 Colegio Inglés teachers, 96 percent of respondents overwhelmingly agreed that their teaching practice benefits from participating in demonstration lessons. As well as providing professional development that facilitated our elementary teachers' transition to the new math program, the model has fostered increased openness and trust between teachers and administrators, fostered a collective focus on student learning, and provided new comfort with "hard" professional discussions. Although the school hasn't abandoned traditional professional development, this coaching model has made us an accountable professional community.

References

National School Reform Faculty. (n.d.). *Tuning protocol: Overview*. Retrieved from www.nsrffharmony.org/protocol/doc/tuning.pdf

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Author's note: All names are pseudonyms.