

# Leading Deep Conversations in Collaborative Inquiry Groups

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**Abstract:** Collaborative inquiry groups, such as professional learning communities and lesson study groups, are proliferating in schools across the United States. In whatever form, the potential for impacting student learning through this collaborative work is expanded or limited by the nature of teachers' conversations. Polite, congenial conversations remain superficially focused on sharing stories of practice, whereas collegial dialogue probes more deeply into teaching and learning. Examples of talk taken from collaborative teacher inquiry groups are used to illustrate these important differences. Specific recommendations are provided, including the role that teacher leaders can play in adopting and modeling specific strategies that support the use of more substantive professional conversation.

**Keywords:** professional dialogue, collaborative inquiry, professional learning community

When the teachers in the Grays Bay professional learning community (PLC) took a moment to look back on their year of collaborative work, one stated:

[We are] struggling with having professional inquiry discussions, digging into a problem, finding out what is at issue with the students, looking at what the professional research says about it, getting in deep. Sometimes, it's like there is just a resistance to want to dig deep professionally into these issues.

The lead teachers of this group were frustrated by the group's tendency to detour away from critical discus-

sions about their students' abilities to write scientific conclusions. In another school, the teacher leader of the Cedar Grove PLC expressed a similar concern that his colleagues only skimmed the surface when exploring teaching-learning relationships and avoided asking or responding to questions that probed or attempted to change the status quo.

These science teacher leaders and colleagues were engaged in collaborative inquiry, a collective enactment of action research. They were dedicated to examining student thinking and understanding how their teaching decisions and actions influenced students' learning. However, engaging in substantive and specific dialogue about teaching and learning is uncommon in U.S. schools. Teachers in the United States 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 connections between the specifics of teachers' practices and what students know and can do is not typical. Alternatively, collaborative inquiry groups (such as PLCs, critical friends groups, and lesson study groups) involve educators in a cycle of inquiry in which they develop a shared vision for student learning and use various forms of student data to identify gaps between this vision and student 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

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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. The facilitation of these conversations is often dependent upon the teachers themselves, because funding for or availability of knowledgeable external facilitators is rare.

As professional development providers and researchers, we are interested in understanding how teacher groups might learn to have what Himley (1991) 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. (59)

To better understand the support that teacher leaders need to foster professional dialogue, 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 to deeper conversations about teaching-learning connections became very apparent to us as participant observers in their collaborative inquiry groups. In the following sections, we discuss what we have come to understand about the discursive challenges of enacting collaborative teacher inquiry and offer ideas that can help collaborative groups move toward more substantive dialogue.

### **Congenial Conversations and the Avoidance of Conflict**

Based on our work with over thirty PLCs engaged in collaborative inquiry, we see this conversational shift from sharing to inquiring as essential if collaborative teacher groups are to have an impact on improving teaching and student learning. However, even when schools give teachers time to come together for collaborative inquiry, at least two factors hinder deep conversation—a traditional school culture of congeniality and teachers' inexperience with 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 reveals differences in beliefs and values and can lead to personal and emotional conflicts. These conflicts are nonproductive and can generate mistrust and fear that fosters resistance to 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. Shifting from these congenial but relatively superficial conversations to dialogue that is more productive for improving student learning entails risk-taking and trust.

Congenial conversations deliberately avoid "fault lines" (Grossman, Wineburg, and Woolworth 2001)—those fundamental differences amongst any group of people that can be ignored when conversations remain pleasantly general but are eventually exposed as people try to understand the meaning of others' words or actions. When teachers simply share ideas with each other, fault lines can be avoided, because an examination of the value of those ideas remains private. 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 should be 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 he or she will go 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.

### **Learning How to Foster Collegial Conversations**

Although 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. However, productive collaborative inquiry is characterized by a willingness to investigate teaching-learning connections and to 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 appendix) 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.” Although the terms that you choose are unimportant, recognizing the differing purposes of different kinds of talk and intentionally using one or the other can support a group’s engagement in productive conversation. *Dialogue* occurs when people actively try to understand others’ meanings by asking questions, posing counterexamples, and suspending judgment; Wells (1999) calls this a “willingness to wonder.” *Discussion* comes after exploratory dialogue has occurred, when 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 the best way to assess students’ understandings about a given concept, 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 actually be done. The group will then employ discussion by explicitly stating that the next desired outcome is to decide upon the assessment tool and determine 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 will be based not on personal attachments to particular strategies, but on 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 and Horn 2007). Because it does often feel risky to open one’s practices to scrutiny, explicit attention to collaborative norms can contribute to an environment of trust and respect (Garmston and Wellman 1999). These norms focus specifically on group communication. One group with which we worked talked explicitly about a need to trust that each could voice their uncertainties without fear of retaliation. A teacher named Grace expressed this idea this way,

Really the idea here is that we can talk about whatever we need to talk about in our classrooms and not feel like if I come in and say, “Look, I’m just not getting something and I’m wondering what you guys can help me with,” that it’s not going to end up going back to someone else and 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 National School Reform Faculty Website n.d.) can support the potentially risky business of collaboratively examining students’ work and relating these practices to instruction (as opposed to anecdotal stories of student achievement). However, if group members do not give explicit attention to the nature of their conversational interactions as described previously, then simply following the steps of a protocol will do little to support honest dialogue about important questions. Also, teachers frequently tell us that these formal protocols feel artificial and awkward, as if they were trying to speak in a newly studied language. Another possibility is for teacher groups to generate a set of questions that can be posted and referenced to stimulate deeper discussion (see appendix). Teacher leaders can model the use of these questions by deliberately referring to the list and selecting an appropriate question. The collectively generated and publicly displayed list provides a foundation for a culture of inquiry, in which 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 to help determine whether the group’s conversations make a difference or not.

### Looking Closely at a Deep Conversation

It is much easier to describe the characteristics of collegial conversations than to enact these characteristics in real life. A brief excerpt from a conversation amongst a group of high school science teachers provides an illustration. Teachers in the Alder Creek PLC often engaged in deep conversations as they sought to improve their students’ abilities to make and interpret data tables and graphs using data from science experiments. As they worked to identify the problems students exhibited when working with graphs, Melody posed a question about their expectations for student understanding: “I’m wondering if we want [students to say] ‘increasing and decreasing’ or ‘directly and inversely’? Because are we looking for patterns or are we looking for

relationships? Perhaps I'm misunderstanding . . ." Four others took turns in responding and clarifying:

Cheryl: No, I think depending on what subject, you're looking for different words. Because I think if you're using a lot of math you're looking—

Lauren: We're looking at a lot of relationships.

McKenzie: More probably in physical science than we do [in biology].

Mason: So you see there's a lot of inversely—and quantitative versus qualitative . . .

Cheryl followed with another question that connected expectations to teaching: "I guess that leads to another question—how do we want to *teach* them? Do we want to teach them 'increasing or decreasing' or do we want to teach them 'indirectly or directly'?"

This short exchange reveals some important aspects of deep conversations. First, Melody framed her statement as a question rather than an assertion, which invited perspectives from others. Cheryl, the group leader, opened this inquiry for further investigation by connecting the group's expectations to their actual teaching practices. Again, rather than asserting that their approach should be one way or the other, her question opened up opportunities to explore what each teacher was doing differently in his or her respective class and how these practices linked to student learning (and possible student confusion). One can imagine this conversation going in a different direction if the PLC environment was not based on trust and respect, or if the teachers' normal way of talking was to assume that they were already using the most effective strategy.

### **Energizing Shared Leadership for Deep Conversations About Teaching and Learning**

Although there are no quick fixes for increasing the depth of dialogue in collaborative teacher inquiry groups, teacher leadership is a critical factor. Much faith must be placed on the power of professional collaboration to positively impact teaching and learning. Yet the challenges of collaborative inquiry are well-documented (McLaughlin and Talbert 2006). Because of the twin constraints of money and expertise, few teacher groups have access to sustained external facilitation. The teachers most invested in these collaborative processes must try themselves 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 play 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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### **APPENDIX. Sample Question Sets for Framing Deeper Conversations in Teacher Inquiry Groups**

#### Examining Instructional Practices

- Why are these meaningful learning goals?
- 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?

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