

SCHOOLS AS COLLABORATIVE LEARNING COMMUNITIES

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Taken individually, each concept in the phrase "collaborative learning community" has incredible power and together, there is a synergy, a revolutionary force that we are only just beginning to recognize in schools.

So what is a "collaborative learning community"? It is a philosophy as well as a place; it is a way of being as well as a working model. It is a mindset as well as a map.

The **foundation** of a collaborative learning community is *collaboration* - working together for common goals, partnership, shared leadership, co-evolving and co-learning - rather than competition and narrow based power.

The **focus** of the collaborative learning community is *learning* - learning where students are actively demonstrating their understanding, not just passing written tests. Learning, based on conceptual relationships of ideas and the processes and the ability to apply this knowledge in a variety of contexts, is a primary goal. Thinking and problem-solving skills, multiple intelligences, learning styles and fostering creativity are embedded in each and everything that is taught with a focus on multiple literacies across the curriculum. Putting the focus on student learning means

- (1) students are response-able for their own learning,
- (2) learning experiences are geared to students' interests and needs,
- (3) students are actively engaged in learning in a variety of groups and contexts, and
- (4) learning is understood, applied and internalised.

Collaboration and learning happen most effectively within the context of *community* - a creation of unity through appreciating and celebrating diversity. A school reflects the population and background of the larger community; therefore, collaborative learning communities help students learn the attitudes, knowledge and skills that benefit all in the community, and community members become partners in facilitating and expanding the learning process. This aids in the building of **COMMUNITY CAPITAL**.

The Center for the Study of Community in Santa Fe, New Mexico provides the following as the identifying characteristics of community:

- Sense of Shared Purpose
- Respect for Differences
- Agreement on Core Values
- Acceptance
- Participation
- Trust
- Communication
- Collaboration
- Commitment

- Reciprocity
- Conscious Choice
- Accountability
- Shared Responsibility
- Efficacy
- Equity
- Perceived Skill
- Openness
- Cohesion

Communities are places or entities where each member can give something, where they can contribute something that they feel especially able to give, something that they are good at. The gift from each member is valued by the whole community and all gifts are unique and individual. The gift that community gives back to each member is that of a role and a connection.

Ed Margaron

Community is...a dynamic set of relationships in which a synergic, self-regulating whole is created out of the combination of individual parts into a cohesive, identifiable, unified form.

Center for the Study of Community, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Collaborative Learning Communities - combine each of the individual elements into a vital, flourishing, and thriving living system. Every living systems in nature has the following dynamics constantly at work to help it become a continually growing and renewing system:

- interdependence of members
- nourishing relationships
- structure and pattern
- sustainability through feedback loops and recycling of materials
- energy flow and cycles
- partnership, co-evolution and co-learning
- diversity through a variety of relationships and/or approaches
- flexibility and permeable boundaries, as well as
- networks that are self-organizing, self-renewing.

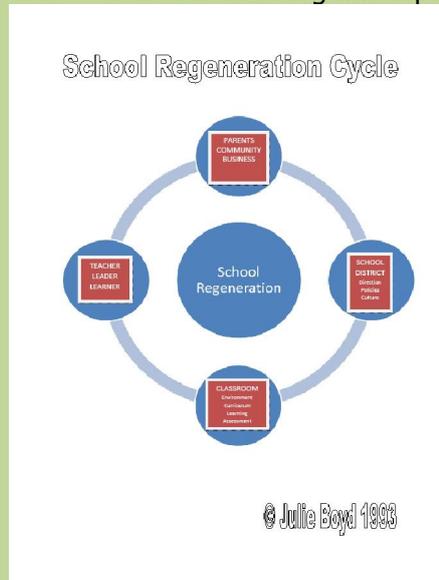
What if we organized schools around these ecological dynamics? Everything from teaching and learning in the classroom to relationships with the community to professional development of educators would change. In order to create a collaborative learning community, one needs to think and operate systemically. Systemic thinking is based on:

- whole rather than parts
- relationships rather than individuals, or separated objects
- process rather than structure
- networks rather than hierarchy
- quality rather than quantity
- sufficiency rather than scarcity
- sustainability rather than exploitation
- dynamic balance rather than constant growth
- interdependence rather than independence
- cooperation rather than competition
- approximation rather than absolute truth
- conservation rather than expansion, and
- partnership rather than domination.

When one thinks systemically than one recognizes that you cannot change one aspect of a system without it affecting everything else. One cannot change curriculum from fact based to conceptual-based without changing teaching and learning strategies and assessment procedures; one cannot change decision-making from district/regional-based to site-based without changing roles and relationships throughout the system.

School/District Circle:

In order to develop the school as a collaborative learning community, the entire staff community needs to have a common vision and agreed upon outcomes for student

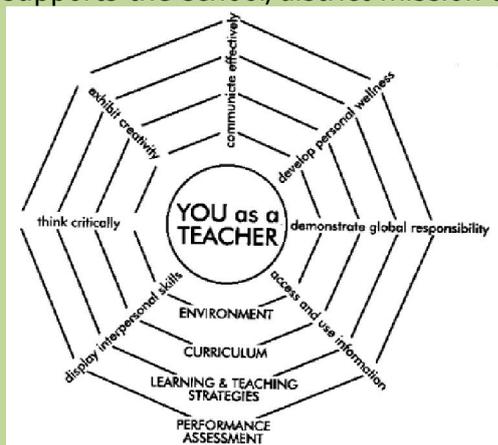


learning and performance.

This is a necessary starting point for school re-creation - what is education for? What are our outcomes for students when they leave our school community? What is our school culture and desirable culture for accomplishing our vision and outcomes? Changing the structures and policies in schools need to be addressed *after* the teachers have worked on refining and aligning classroom practice. There have been many schools in the past few years who have changed the daily schedule to allow teacher teaming and planning, only to find that teachers did not take advantage of the changed procedure because the staff had not built their own collegiality or had not changed their classroom practices to warrant the change in timetable. Just as a cooperative structure in cooperative learning does not make a collaborative classroom, so too, only changing the structure in a school will not make a collaborative school without a culture and collegial environment that supports it. Therefore, begin with the end in mind by establishing common vision and outcomes, then work to refine classroom practice and staff collegiality.

Classroom Practice Circle:

Over the past few years there have been many improvements in curriculum, effective teaching and learning strategies and assessment procedures. What is now needed in most schools is an alignment of these practices. We have cooperative learning teachers whose environment in the classroom is still very teacher-directed, rather than student-centered. We have cooperative learning teachers who are using cooperative learning with a fact based curriculum, rather than its most appropriate use for conceptual-based curriculum. We have teachers teaching fragmented bits of the curriculum, rather than through an integrated, meaning-based approach. We have teachers using conceptual-based, constructivist curriculum with only paper-pencil test assessments, rather than having their students performing their learning. In a collaborative learning community, desired outcomes, the classroom environment, the curriculum, effective teaching and learning strategies, and assessment procedures are aligned and reflect a core philosophy and values about teaching and learning. Everything that is done in the classroom supports the school/district mission and moves students toward the desired outcomes.



Teachers/Administrators as Teacher/Learner:

Educators can change who they teach, what they teach, how they teach and how they assess, most effectively, with opportunities to work together with other teachers. The staff need to increase their own collegiality. In addition, each person involved in schools needs to see themselves as continuous learners modelling the love of learning and life-long learning practices they desire for their students. We cannot re-create schools as collaborative learning communities without sustained professional development and dialogue. We must have time to reflect on our craft. This simply means that we will never achieve our goals without sustained professional development and collaborative reflection practices, such as action research, coaching, mentoring, etc. Another aspect of seeing ourselves as teachers and learners in this constant process of change is accountability. Like our students, every educator in the system must grow and learn. If students are keeping journals and learning logs, why are the educators? If students are engaging in research and keeping portfolios, why aren't the teachers? We know what facilitates good learning and we need to apply it to ourselves, if we truly are to become a self-renewing learning organization.

A learning organization is a place where people are continually discovering how they create their reality and how they can change it.

Peter Senge

Refining and aligning classroom practice, and building on-going dialogue about teaching and learning and collegiality on staff, will necessitate revisiting the school/district circle and plan for structural changes. Changes in the schedule, changes in staffing roles, changes in student programs and opportunities, changes in teacher reconfigurations and changes in policy and procedures come once we have a clearer idea of what is specifically needed at our school.

Successful community building depends in large measure on each individual school defining for itself its own life and creating for itself its own practice of schooling. This inside-out strategy requires a considerable amount of searching and reflection as teachers struggle with such issues as who they are, what they hope to become for the students they serve, and how they will decide, organize, teach, learn and live together.

Thomas Sergiovanni

Parents, Community, Business Partnership Circle:

None of this is possible without the involvement, from the beginning and continuously throughout the change process, of parents and community people. Many schools and districts have made the mistake of changing aspects of classroom practice, or teachers/administrators as teachers and learners, or school/district culture, outcomes, structures and policies without involving their key constituencies - parents and students. They, then, try to work too late for "buy-in". Partnership is not about "buy-in"; it is about authentic involvement, participation, shared leadership and shared decision-making. Involving key people from "outside" the school is essential to establishing your school as a collaborative learning community. Students are learning as much in the community, in the media and in their homes as they are in schools. We must be partners in facilitating learning. Partnerships in learning usually go through developmental stages of growth, moving from sponsorship to cooperation/collaboration to true, reciprocal partnership with permeable boundaries of responsibility. Students also need opportunities to utilize their learning in the community through internships, community service, establishing enterprises themselves and through participating in community-based learning lessons. Likewise, community members need to be in schools to support and extend the students' work and learning. Schools cannot do it alone, as the African proverb says, "It takes a village to raise a child". Collaborative learning communities work to make this a reality, not rhetoric.

The Parts of the Circles to the Whole of School Re-Creation:

When we think systemically, one can not change one element of these components of school change without changing another. Change is not linear; it is cyclical. To move to become more of a collaborative learning community, we plan in each arena simultaneously. For a collaborative learning community has:

- Shared vision and outcomes for students
- An open, trusting, caring culture that is manifested through stories, rituals, traditions as well as futuristic thinking and consistent community-building
- Procedures for acknowledging participation and contribution of members
- Supportive structures and policies to implement the vision and facilitate change
- A flexible design for change and for implementing research-based innovations
- Procedures for continual assessment and evaluation of school successes and failures
- Shared leadership that develops responsibility in all members of the community, that helps people respect the need for operating for the common good and that both challenges and supports people through the change process

- Opportunities for sustained professional development and collaborative reflective practices
- Time to work together to support change and learning
- Meaningful ways to work together and increase collegiality
- Communication procedures to allow for substantive conversations about the art and craft of teaching and learning, knowledgeable participation, conflict resolution, valuing difference, and cross-gender, cross-cultural, cross-generational dialogue
- Authentic partnerships that expand the network and increase everyone's opportunities to learn
- Opportunities for learning in and with the wider community
- Classroom and school environments where all "care about each other and help each other learn"
- Curricular content and learning opportunities that help students to construct meaning and to take responsibility for their own learning
- Effective teaching and learning strategies that motivate students, that addresses a variety of learning styles and that helps to promote life-long processes, skills, attitudes and knowledge of learning
- Assessment procedures that continuously measure students' ability to use knowledge in a variety of contexts, using a variety of assessment methods and a variety of assessors, including student self-assessment
- Practices in classrooms and throughout the school community that are aligned to a core philosophy and to the principles of living systems.

Like tidal waves that clear island reefs and create opportunities for new, stronger and more appropriate growth, so the wave of transformation is pervading the portals of our schools. The words collaborative learning communities are now bandied around with great aplomb in meetings, classrooms and in policy and curriculum documents. We need to use this opportunity to really examine what we think education is, what we see as desired outcomes for students and how we think learning is facilitated. We need to construct our own meaning, in our own context, of a collaborative learning community. Yet, this we know, it is not a checklist of factors, it a mindset as much as a map. It is a philosophy as much as a place. It is the essence of what this magazine and association has always stood for---the synergy of collaboration, learning and community. It is taking responsibility for our craft, our own development and that of our students; it is ensuring our future.

The process of really being with others in a safe, supportive situation can actually change who we think we are and as we grow closer to the essence of who we are, we tend to take more responsibility for our neighbours and our planet .

Bill Kauth

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