Learning Forward is committed to supporting those responsible for facilitating effective professional learning. We look forward to coming together and focusing on moving systems toward powerful professional learning for the purpose of impacting student achievement. The Standards for Professional Learning outline the characteristics of professional learning that leads to effective teaching practices, supportive leadership, and improved student results. Learning Forward is the only association focused solely on the most critical lever in improving schools –

Building the knowledge and skills of educators.

Through the Standards for Professional Learning, Learning Forward leads the field in understanding what links professional learning to improved student achievement.

The Standards for Professional Learning is the third iteration of standards outlining the characteristics of professional learning that lead to effective teaching practices, supportive leadership, and improved student results. Learn more about the Standards for Professional Learning at:

http://learningforward.org/standards-for-professional-learning#.VroFhxgrLUJ

We hope you will join us on April 5th as we explore the Standards for Professional Learning at our event entitled Leading Teams: Promoting Effective Collaboration.

LEARNING FORWARD ONTARIO IS OFFERING A ONE-DAY INSTITUTE THIS SPRING IN HAMILTON

TUESDAY, APRIL 5, 2016

FOCUSED ON

LEADING TEAMS: PROMOTING EFFECTIVE COLLABORATION

See inside for more information.
What’s the difference between “the student doesn’t know how to infer” and “the student didn’t respond to a prompt that asked for an inference”? One key contrast is that the first is an interpretation about student learning while the second is a description of what can be seen or heard from a student’s response. Both are important. However, in order to make good interpretations, it is essential that collaborative teams spend time first describing what they see, hear and sense in the student work before they come to understand what it might mean.

In the last few years, working with teachers in the role of facilitator in collaborative inquiries, I have recognized the importance of protocols to structure professional collaboration, develop shared understandings, and surface new insights into learning and teaching. One of the most powerful ways to surface those insights is through analyzing student work. Analyzing student work allows a team to collaboratively focus and look for details in the student work, be it a product, observation or conversation, to give a sense about the learning, to raise questions about something that is puzzling, and to stimulate action toward the next necessary step to advance the learning.

There are a number of protocols to guide the analysis of student work, and many include a step for description to a greater or lesser degree. One protocol which features description as a distinct step in the process is included in the Capacity Building Series Pedagogical Documentation Revisited (Student Achievement Division, 2014). It includes description as the second step, after setting the context to understand the student work, and preceding making interpretations, determining implications and actions, and finally reflecting on the learning by the group of educators as a result of using the protocol. Another is the Collaborative Assessment Conference Protocol which is included in the book, Protocols for Professional Learning. Here Easton (2009) suggests that the facilitator, at step 4 of this protocol, asks members of the team to “provide non-evaluative descriptions of the student work using questions such as “What do you see?” “What’s there?” and “What’s not there?” If members of the team provide evaluative statements, the facilitator, Easton recommends asking participants to rephrase their comments as descriptions.

This isn’t to say that interpretation is not important. It is. However, the interpretation needs to be based on a solid understanding of the student work being analyzed. By spending time on description, taking on a more objective lens to the student work, improves the chances that a range of interpretations will be made evident, and through these, more responsive actions or set of actions to advance the learning will be planned and implemented.

One specific moment from a collaborative inquiry I recall which illustrates this is when, during the analysis of student work, one member of a team looked at a piece of writing and declared that the student did not know how to spell. (I know, spelling may seem like a finer point, but it’s where the team went at that point in time.) When asked to be more specific, the teacher went on to say that the student did not know how to spell a number of multi-syllable words and the names of key concepts. A number of the other members of the team agreed.

This assertion, the student did not know how to spell some words, was an interpretation. Yes, there were words spelled incorrectly in the writing, but when the team ‘interpreted’ that the student couldn’t spell some words, it was a generalization that could have lead them to a response that did not truly take into account where the student was at. Once the team spent more time to consider what they were seeing, and in this case were encouraged to look for and describe any patterns they were seeing, they discovered that the student work included words incorrectly spelled a number of times, and each time the spelling was different. In other words, each
time the word was misspelled, the misspelling was inconsistent. Based on this more complete description, the members of the team were able to now say that the student sample suggested that the student could not spell some words, and it appeared that the student was trying out different spellings. This suggested that the student recognized that the spelling was incorrect (and perhaps doing some self-monitoring) and was using knowledge of words to try to find a correct way. This is different from a student who consistently misspells a word because this may suggest that the student has accepted the incorrect spelling as correct. In this case, having a more solid description of the student lead the team to a fuller interpretation that they could then use to design a response in line with both what the student knows and didn’t know, what the student could and couldn’t do.

This illustrates City, Elmore, Fiarman and Teitel’s (2010) point that “The discipline of description is helpful... because it slows you down and helps you identify what your conclusion is based on, allowing you to check your assumptions before and after taking action”. As educators, we need to slow down because our professional lives are full of things we need to do. Their statement reminds me of my own development in the role as facilitator. I’ve learned from experience that if you cut the step of description because you perceive that a team is pressed for time, ineffective actions based on limited interpretations result. Spending time on description may seem like a luxury when there are so many things that require our attention, and especially when we often feel compelled to take action to address a student learning need. However, I have learned how necessary it is to slow down and pay attention to the details contained in the student work.

Spending time on the description of student work helps collaborative teams gain greater insights into student learning and moves them away from responses and actions that are less effective and, in some cases, counterproductive.

Spending time on the description leads collaborative teams toward specificity and away from generalizations and assumptions. As Easton (2009) states, “Facilitators needs to help participants surmount superficiality”. Description allows for more detailed information about the learning to be surfaced. By describing what is and what isn’t in the student work opens a more objective lens. When the information gained through description is more precise, it improves the chances the interpretation about and the response to the student learning will also be more carefully considered.

Secondly, spending time on the description leads collaborative teams toward a specific point in the student’s learning and away from a whole history about the student. The past experiences may unduly cloud the work on the table. Description helps to focus the team on the present learning, and to consider all options as responses rather than prematurely eliminating actions that may be assumed will not work based on the history with the student. For the teacher of the student whose work is being analyzed, it helps to set aside a whole catalogue of assessment information that the teacher carries about a student (which is important for reporting purposes), and allows him or her to focus on a particular picture of learning at a particular time. Hearing descriptions from colleagues about what the student can do included with what is not evident is also helpful to reinforce an asset approach to the student learning.

Thirdly, spending time on the description leads teams toward the learning and away from the teaching that produced the learning. Story swapping and exchanging instructional strategies tend to distract collaborative teams from carrying out the precise action targeting the student need. Insisting on having student work on the table, and then spending time to describe it, teams are able to focus on the needs of the learner rather than on the effectiveness of the teaching. This should also help teams resist the allure of the ‘strategy trap’ and guide them to planning actions based on learner need rather than novelty or teacher interest.

Although describing student work is only one step in the process of analysing student work, it is a step that is necessary to help set the conditions for making more solid interpretations which thereby increase the chances for designing more effective responses which address students’ learning needs.

References:
Members of collaborative learning teams that are committed to honing their personal practices to drive school improvement engage in authentic dialogue. Critical and honest discourse becomes a vehicle that allows professionals to unpack tacit knowledge, explore personal biases or misconceptions, and build on new insights or ideas. This protocol requires team members to silently consider colleagues’ written ideas and questions while allowing them the opportunity to articulate their own thinking through written or visual means. When participants engage in this protocol, they find it particularly powerful because they remain silent throughout the duration which enables them to really consider the ideas and views of others that sometimes do not get heard during regular conversation. In addition, some participants find that they are especially careful to articulate their ideas more clearly in writing, but may have a tendency to rush through their ideas orally. The beauty of this protocol is that it is so incredibly fluid and adaptable that it can be adopted into any stage of the collaborative inquiry process because the facilitator selects the most strategic prompts and the tight to loose structure set the tone for the dialogue. In addition, the number of participants can vary, in fact, as long as there are two or more willing participants, visual dialogue has the potential to generate rich learning and reflection.

When selecting a protocol, a leader normally recognizes that the protocol fits a specific purpose for the team. Visual dialogue can be used to support participants in reflecting, generating ideas, connecting important thinking, or in solving problems. Depending on the facilitator’s intentions for incorporating the visual dialogue protocol into the teams’ learning pathway, the facilitator may select to strategically organize the physical environment (free flow, small group circulation, all hands on, degree of interaction), the opportunities for engagement (number and nature of prompts), and the degree of rigidity (by shaping their own role within the protocol, providing time limits). Leaders who are facilitating the collaborative team’s learning have many options when considering incorporating an opportunity for participants to engage in visual dialogue so feel free to play with this protocol to suit the learning goals of the team. Another characteristic of this protocol that makes it so easy to implement is that the time commitment is extremely flexible. The basic version of visual dialogue is provided on the following page, but possible modifications are also shared in the sidebar to support facilitators in imagining new applications for this versatile protocol. Please feel free to share your experiences with this protocol, as well as the applications and modifications that produced positive outcomes. Drop us a line at editor@learningforwardontario.ca.

Dr. Margot Heaton works as a Vice-Principal for the Greater Essex County District School Board. She recently graduated with her doctorate from the Joint PhD Program at the University of Windsor, Brock University, and Lakehead University. Her research interests are in professional learning communities.
I have engaged in various versions of this protocol in different settings. A version of this protocol was developed by Hilton Smith, Foxfire Fund, adapted for the NSRF by Marylyn Wentworth, and shared on the nsrfharmony.org website.

PURPOSE
The purpose of this protocol is to deeply consider new ideas and perspectives, although depending on how the facilitator chooses to use it, it can be used for almost any purpose.

PREPARATION
It is important to provide one marker per participant and some chart paper. It is also helpful to have rich intentional questions developed and often written on the chart paper or chalk board or available to post.

PROCESS
1. The facilitator introduces visual dialogue as a silent protocol. Any participant may add to the conversation as they please. You can comment on other people’s ideas simply by drawing a connecting line to the comment. Participants may respond using words, pictures or checkmarks (to show agreement) or question marks (to ask for more information).

2. The facilitator writes or posts a relevant question in a circle on the board. Sample questions:
   • What is the role of a teacher?
   • How can we involve the community in the school and the school in community?
   • What do you know about Confederation?
   • How are decimals used in this world?

3. The facilitator distributes markers to everyone.

4. Participants write as they feel moved. Extended periods of thoughtfulness is common so resist the urge to call the activity to an end.

5. The way the facilitator chooses to carry out their role in visual dialogue influences its outcome. It is sometimes appropriate for the facilitator to circle interesting ideas or ask a new question to support the learning and further reflection of the team. Facilitators may help to generate momentum or guide the dialogue down specific pathways depending on how they choose to play their role.

6. The facilitator observes the team and determines when the written dialogue is finished. The facilitator can select to open up the dialogue to the entire group or allow the visual dialogue to stand on its own.

DEBRIEF THE PROCESS
The facilitator debriefs the protocol, asking questions like:
• How did this protocol help you to think further or differently about this issue?
• What worked well for you?
• What could we try next time to make it even more effective?

POSSIBLE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS THAT MIGHT BENEFIT FROM VISUAL DIALOGUE
• A teacher learning community meeting that is attempting to investigate the root cause of an ongoing school issue.
• A classroom of students who must share insights regarding a concept.
• A workshop that allows members to dig deeper and explore a complex idea.
• A staff meeting that requires brainstorming to move towards the school goal.
• A collaborative inquiry group meeting that requires reflection over some significant findings.

POSSIBLE MODIFICATIONS TO THE BASIC VISUAL DIALOGUE STRUCTURE
• Incorporate prompts or questions that are linked throughout the room that participants can visit either in a free flow format or in a team rotation format.
• Break into smaller, more specific visual dialogue groups once the responses to the question arrives at a certain point and begin a more intimate visual dialogue from that point.
• Invite participants to stop mid-stream and orally share with another colleague or participant, then resume the writing.
• Pause the visual dialogue to read out selected reflections, then invite participants to journal privately.
Engaging Thought Leaders

AN INTERVIEW WITH

Sharron Helmke

Sharron Helmke is Coordinator of Instructional Coaching with the Clear Creek Independent School District in League City, Texas. She is responsible for the development of the district-wide coaching program, coordinating professional learning for the districts’ coaches and working with campus and district administrators to maximize the effectiveness of instructional coaches.

Learning Forward Ontario: How can coaches and administrators work together in order to sustain school improvement?

Sharron Helmke: I think that it has a lot to do with creating both a need and a desire for teachers to learn, as opposed to just saying coaching is available. If principals and coaches don’t work together to develop that sense of urgency, then as a teacher, I’m probably not going to change my practice. I’m not going to change my practice to improve students’ test scores, but I will change my practice to do something that is dear to my heart, something that taps into my passion for education. So you have to tap into the reason people became educators – that sense of urgency about what they want to change in the world and for kids – and you make that the context that moves throughout the culture and the coaching. This becomes the reason we have to do the work, and then you pose the inquiry:

What do we need?
What are the student learning needs?
Where are our kids not being successful?

So you combine the desire that educators have to make kids’ lives better with finding the area of work that needs our attention now. That creates a culture of change and growth in which teachers tend to seek help because they want to move closer to their goal of what education can be.

Administrators are not having to mandate that teachers work with coaches, which we know isn’t successful, but you are getting more teachers to want to have a partner in improvement. And so if principals create that urgency – tap into it and then coaches can pick up on it – if principals start a campus-wide conversation about what our kids need and deserve, then it makes a space for coaching for growth that is self-motivated. With this kind of partnership, coaches have an easier time getting into classrooms and finding a common purpose with teachers. They can capitalize on this, striving for improvement by being available to teachers and by being in classrooms supporting teachers.
Learning Forward Ontario: What advice do you have for an administrator in order to maximize coaching in his/her building?

Sharron Helmke: I think that it is really important to let teachers know that coaching is the way we grow and that everyone is expected to grow. Not necessarily to use coaches, but to grow in a way that’s comfortable for them which produces impactful results for students. If you are creating that sense of urgency and you are posing a question – a campus-wide conversation – maybe it is something like:

What kind of education do our kids deserve?

Then everybody is talking about it and teachers seek out coaches. After a teacher is successful with a coach and they develop a new skill, then the teacher should want to celebrate it.

Imagine you set up this coaching cycle that has a teacher working closely with a coach and then the coach steps back, lets the teacher practice alone for a bit, and later the coach comes back to observe the teacher’s use of the new practice. They look at it together – the teacher and the coach – and decide whether this is it. We’ve got it! Or it needs more work. When the teacher decides:

I’ve got it! This practice is in place.

Then it should move to the administrator’s attention. The administrator should then visit the classroom and see it, not because he is checking or monitoring, but because the teacher said:

I’ve learned something new. Please come watch me do it.

So then we start building those practices into the everyday culture and expectations. I think creating that cycle – so that a teacher and a coach work together to practice and then celebrate it – is how we build capacity and create continuous growth.

Learning Forward Ontario: What advice do you have for a new coach working with teachers?

Sharron Helmke: I think, of course, relationship building, just like everybody says, is key. I also think it’s important for new coaches to be in the classrooms with teachers in a supportive role, listening and hearing what teachers are doing. When it comes time for students to do independent practice or group work, the coach can then get up and move around and start helping so that they are seen as someone who really supports learning. They’re not trying to take anything away from the teacher or take over the class. They are supporting when more voices and more hands are necessary to move among the students and support their work. And so they gradually start to have a larger role in the classroom helping and working side by side with the teacher so that when it is time for the teacher to say:

You know, I would really like to try this.

Then the coach steps in and says:

I can help with that.

Then they move into more formal coaching. But I think that a lot of new coaches are reluctant to be in those classrooms at first and even when they are, they are reluctant to get up and do more than just observe. But having a coach just sit in the back of the room and observe isn’t nearly as effective as having a coach actively participate as a partner in instruction.
BEYOND METHOD: Assessment and Learning Practices and Values


What is this research about?

The researchers sought to uncover detectable patterns of difference between teachers’ values and practices. Focusing specifically on assessment practices, the researchers described assessment for learning as follows:

“Assessment for Learning is the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there” (p. 110).

The researchers also examined factors that prohibited teachers’ ability to sustain practices that were in line with their beliefs and values. Specifically, constraints related to complying with “performance goals defined by the curriculum, through closed questioning, and measured by marks and grades” (p. 123). These were closely aligned with assessment of learning practices. The tensions between promoting assessment for learning and assessment of learning in classrooms are explored.

What did the researchers do?

In studying how teachers’ values were reflected in their practice, the researchers administered a 30-item questionnaire on two occasions; first to obtain baseline data and two years later in order to measure change. The design of the questionnaire was informed by models and frameworks and contained key dimensions of classroom assessment practices identified in literature. The 558 teachers in the study consisted of primary and secondary school teachers in England. The researchers acknowledged potential concerns in regard to collecting self-report data (are teachers’ perceptions of their own practice accurately reported?) but noted that the results suggested that respondents were honest as evident in “their willingness to reveal gaps between their values and their practices” (113).

What you need to know...

Implications regarding the design of teachers’ professional learning included the importance of engaging teachers in the critical examination of their values and beliefs. In addition, the authors suggested that teachers should be provided opportunities to clarify the values/practice gap in order to find ways to implement more “values-informed classroom practices” (p. 112).

What did the researchers find?

The research revealed “marked gaps between the levels of value and practice in relation to a number of classroom assessment practices” (p. 119). The largest gaps were as follows:

1. Opportunities for creating space in classroom lessons to discuss with students ways of improving learning how to learn.
2. Involving students in important decisions shaping their learning such as planning and learning objectives, and for helping students to think about how they learn best.
3. Providing students with opportunities to assess each other’s work and learning.
4. Providing students with guidance to assess their own work and learning.
5. Teachers’ use of assessment practices to help students to learn independently.

It was clear that in relation to a wide range of assessment that reflected an assessment for learning philosophy, teachers’ practice was not congruent with their values. The authors reported, “Levels of teachers’ practices were strikingly short of the high levels of importance they attached to the practices” (p. 121).

On the other hand, in relation to promoting assessment of learning, the researchers found that the typical teacher in the research sample was “pushed to levels of practice in excess of what he/she valued[d] as important for the quality of their students’ learning” (p. 125). For example, teachers’ practices that were in excess of what he/she valued included:

1. Assessing student work using primarily marks and grades.
2. Questioning for factual knowledge.
3. Determining lessons based on prescribed curriculum rather than how well students achieved.

In conclusion, in relation to using assessment to promote learner autonomy, “a dimension of assessment considered by project teachers as an important strategy for helping their students to improve the quality of their learning” (p. 131) teachers felt the “heaviest burdens of constraint as reflected in the largest values-practice gap” (p. 131).
For decades, the most respected educational thought leaders and researchers have promoted professional learning designs that are inquiry-based and aimed to develop teacher leadership and promote effective collaboration. These themes will be explored throughout the day.

Beate Planche will facilitate a discussion on some of the co-learning strategies from the new book by Lyn Sharratt and Beate Planche entitled ‘Leading Collaborative Learning: Empowering Excellence’. Next, Margot Heaton will model the use of protocols as a critical component in supporting high-leverage collaborative work.

In the afternoon, an Open Space Forum will take place.

What are the ideas, questions, and possibilities I want to explore in order to support effective collaboration in order to advance professional learning?

Objectives for the Open Space Forum include:

- consider how to set the conditions for effective collaboration;
- identify issues and offer potential solutions related to supporting collaborative inquiry;
- engage in conversations in which we learn from and with one another and build understandings about effective facilitation;
- reflect on and generate practices for supporting adult learning, collaboration, and increasing efficacy;
- become familiar with the Open Space design.

Registration is limited. Please access the registration form at: http://goo.gl/forms/SHMOeK4LK9

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