Leading and Learning in Networks
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Introduction

Meaningful learning for children and adults almost always happens in collaborative context. Schools in the York Region District School Board, just north of Toronto in Ontario, Canada have spent a better part of the past decade working to ensure that collaborative, networked learning through joint work will become the structure and the norm at every level of the system. Drawing upon the wisdom, expertise and support of researchers like Stephen Katz and Lorna Earl (2007), Richard Elmore (2009), along with Michael Fullan and Australians’ Peter Hill and Carmel Crevola (2006), district leaders have led schools within the district towards the formation of small, robust learning networks, comprised of system support staff, school administrators and teacher leaders. Learning networks are professional learning communities in school networked together. In this model, the classroom is the locus of improved student achievement and the learning network is the locus of capacity building of the teachers and administrators to change classroom practice resulting in enhanced student achievement. In our vision, we learn with, from and on-behalf of each other, and are focused on knowledge creation and sharing.

This article recounts the experiences of two school networks that used evidence-based decision making processes, being conscious of the strongest form of collaboration being joint work to respond to a problem of practice to utilize targeted funding from the Ontario Ministry of Education to design a structure and process that would attempt to bring the risks and rewards of networked learning right into the classroom. In the fall months, data was gathered from each school in the networks around the impact of the current improvement focus on student achievement. As well, data was collected on classroom practice, especially as it related to the implementation of the Teaching and Learning Cycle (TLC) planning model. While some of the schools in the network were identified as improving schools (i.e. achievement exceeded the Board’s improvement trajectory), our analysis of the implementation of the TLC suggested that schools were at the early implementation of this model with little evidence of a focus on “students to watch” or little evidence of differentiated instruction.

In our work as a learning network, we had become familiar with the work of Dr. Steven Katz and Dr. Lorna Earl and had read about their research in the area of collaboration, network learning communities and ‘joint work’. They reference the work by Judith Warren Little (1990); who places true collaboration at the end of a continuum of collegial relations.

Starting from Weakest to Strongest

1. Storytelling: Learning flows in one direction communicated as anecdotes not directly connected to the hearer’s experience.

2. Help and assistance: Assistance provided only when asked for. Again, learning flows in one direction. It’s applied to a relevant problem but tactical and limited.
3. Sharing: Learning flows in two directions but is not applied and adapted into new learning. We simply express our own experiences with each other.

4. Joint work: True collaboration in the form of teaming, planning, observation, action research, sustained peer coaching, mentoring, etc. A relationship that induces a sense of mutual obligation, exposes each participant’s thoughts and behaviour to the scrutiny and evaluation of the other participant, and promotes an interdependence that previously was not part of the relationship.

The two learning networks; Network #1 and Network #2, drew upon Warren-Little’s research and the School Effectiveness Framework (2010), a document developed by the Ontario Ministry of Education, as a common resource support the guide their work at the school and network level. In both cases, the networks focused upon creating a structure that would develop teacher capacity through classroom-focused learning that was designed to meet the learning needs of struggling students, or ‘students to watch’.

In both cases, the process was structured to enable teachers to use student need as the launching pad for a professional learning cycle of co-planning, co-teaching and co-debriefing, or, joint work. Each network chose a cycle length that allowed them to respond to the learning needs of their teachers. Network #1 chose to focus on creating a 6 week cycle as the context for their learning, while Network #2 chose to focus their teacher learning over a sequence of shared lessons over a shorter time span.

**North Learning Network #1**

York Region District School Board, North Learning Network #1 is comprised of nine elementary schools. As a learning network, the Principals, Vice Principals, Literacy Teachers, Regional Consultants, Principal from Leadership Development and Superintendent of Schools meet once a month. As a network, we wanted to engage large numbers of teachers in ‘joint work’ (wanting to attain the level of work outlined in #4 of Judith Warren Little’s work) for a variety of purposes. Specifically, our learning goals for this work were to engage in joint work with teachers from another school in our learning network in the planning and implementation of a Teaching and Learning Cycle (TLC). We also wanted to highlight certain aspects of the TLC as crucial – i.e., how are we making instructional decisions and why? Another goal was to build the capacity of our Literacy Teachers in a coaching role and to model effective planning in a co-learner setting for all participating teachers and administrators.

Our final learning goal for the project was to engage Grade 2,3,5 and 6 teachers from nine different schools, along with their Administrators and Literacy Teachers in ‘Joint Work’; planning, teaching, assessing and reflecting of an entire “Teaching and Learning Cycle” (Figure 1).
Teaching and Learning Cycle ‘Joint Work’ Learning (Figure 1)

The TLC represents an inquiry cycle of assessing student achievement, focusing on the “students to watch”, assessing the current practice, designing instruction which supports learning in the classroom and assessing the impact of that instruction on the students with special emphasis on the achievement of the “students to watch”.

A core planning team of Vice Principals and Regional Consultants worked with the Literacy Teachers from each school to plan how we would engage in our learning with the teachers over the course of three release times (one half day session, one full day session, one half day session). The plan for the three release sessions is outlined below.

During our first TLC Joint Work Session we gathered all teachers and administrators to analyse student data in reading that teachers had brought from their homeroom classes. In reviewing the student work we asked teachers to look for trends in the data, notice student strengths and areas for improvement. From this information we asked school grade teams to identify the ‘most urgent student learning need’ for their students as related to the reading curriculum. Once the most urgent student learning need in reading had been determined, the planning team grouped school teams according to these needs to form specific TLC planning teams. These groupings created the focus expectations for each group’s TLC unit and the expectation(s) the groups would be tracking using their ‘class tracking sheet’ (Figure 2). Teachers and administrators then formed their new cross-school planning teams and began to explore other expectations within the Language curriculum or other subject area curriculum they wanted to cluster in the creation of their unit. Next, the teams created learning goals and success criteria along with the rubric that would be used for the assessment of the TLC and began the task of designing the diagnostic task that each student would complete at the beginning of the unit. These tasks were all accomplished in the first half day planning session. School teams were
asked to work together back at their location to prepare for the next planning session. Teams were asked to administer the diagnostic task with all students and to consider two ideas they could use as ‘BIG IDEAS’ for the TLC and a picture book that could be used as a mentor text for each. Teachers were also asked to bring a blank class list to help create their class tracking sheet and to bring resources that are regularly used to plan at their school.

Class Tracking Sheet Sample (Figure 2)

Our second TLC Joint Work Session was a full day planning session approximately two weeks after our initial half day. We gathered all teachers and administrators and started the day with a discussion and learning about ‘shared reading’ lead by our board consultant team. After this learning we asked cross-school planning teams to work in smaller groups to collaboratively score the student diagnostic task that students had completed back at their schools. The teams determined which students would be monitored as the unit progressed. They then identified on class lists which students would be the ‘students to monitor’ and set achievement targets for the entire class. Teams were then given a significant portion of the planning time to collaboratively develop the summative task to be administered at the end of the TLC using the gradual release of responsibility mode and plan lessons that would lead students towards meeting the criteria. During this process they were asked to select a mentor text to model with students as the unit progressed and to consider and plan the formative assessments along the way that would inform their teaching and the feedback they would give to students. Each team used a TLC planning template to help guide this process (Figure 3). At the end of this planning session, teams were asked to prepare for next session back at their school by delivering the series of lessons planned in collaboration with the team and to reflect on how each lesson was delivered. We asked teachers to consider the following questions: What was the most effective instructional strategy used? How do you know? It was the expectation that each teacher have their students complete the culminating task (summative) with their class.
Our third and final TLC Joint Work Session was six weeks after the previous planning session. All teachers and administrators gathered once again to discuss new learnings and reflect on the process. We began this half day planning session by asking teachers to engage in teacher moderation using the culminating tasks from their units. Our board consultant team modelled the process we would use for moderation and then each cross-school team did this work in their groups. Teams then worked together to update class tracking sheet with new data they had just gathered. Finally, each cross-school team was asked to reflect on the effectiveness of their TLC unit and the process that we had worked through in planning the unit using a reflection template (Figure 4). To celebrate our collaboration and joint work, we asked all participants to work together to share the journey of their TLC by making a poster display they could share with other groups.
As result of our Joint Work Planning Sessions, five grade 2/3 TLC units and four grade 5/6 TLC units were collaboratively planned, delivered, assessed and reflected upon. Throughout this process there were many in depth conversations about curriculum expectations, the importance of co-creating learning goals and success criteria, the creation of rubrics and consideration of creating robust tasks. This work, ultimately led to an engaging culminating task as well as discussions about when and how to offer descriptive feedback and which types of assessments to use and when. The literacy teachers from each school had been partnered with teachers from their school and one other school to facilitate the discussions and planning. This format allowed the literacy teachers to coach during the planning stages as well as to guide discussions with teachers from their schools as well as teachers from another school. This underlined the importance of developing a trusting professional relationship on the basis of achieving a common goal and understandings.

The creation of common understandings came to fruition at its highest level during our third working session. During this session, TLC teams engaged in teacher moderation with the culminating tasks from their units, updated class tracking sheets and reflected on the process of joint work throughout the planning and delivery of the TLC. In the spirit of true collaboration, the teacher moderation process led to the creation of new common understandings in assessment practice; specifically, the use of success criteria and the rubric together while assessing student work. By using both the success criteria and the rubric, we are not merely using a checklist to ensure that students have the required features of the work, but rather that each of those features meets a high standard with respect to quality and demonstrates learning in each of the four areas of the achievement chart; knowledge and understanding, communication, application and thinking. The use of class tracking/data collection sheets for a specific unit and expectation were invaluable in determining the effectiveness of instruction and
next steps for student learning and subsequent teacher learning. This knowledge is carried forward to the creation of the next TLC and used to inform our Learning Network about the teacher learning that will be supportive and timely. Finally, the group reflection process lead to the creation of new understandings as to the process and design of the joint work in which we had engaged.

Overall, teachers enjoyed the opportunity to learn and plan with teachers from another school and the opportunity to learn with different administrators and/or literacy teachers. There was an overwhelming appreciation for the use of a common planning template. The teachers felt there were specific elements of the TLC that needed to be co-planned by teachers of the same grade. These areas included: assessments, learning goals, success criteria, the ‘Big Idea’, rubric, and some mentor texts and resources. The use of the common planning template was very effective for this collaborative planning. Teachers also shared that it was very difficult to jointly plan individual lessons with such a large planning team and therefore suggested that the individual lessons be created by smaller groups so that they could be tailored to the learners in each individual class more readily. In the future, teachers recommended another full day of planning time in the middle of the process to share formative student information and adjust teaching and instruction in preparation for the unit end and the culminating task.

The success of the North Network #1 Joint TLC Work was in the creation of new, common understandings and learnings. We met the success criteria developed for the project, forged new learning partnerships and gained insight into the creation of new knowledge. “We learn about the work by doing the work, not telling other people to do the work, not by having done the work at some time in the past.” (City, Elmore, Fiarman and Teitel; Instructional Rounds in Education, 2010, p.33).

**North Network #2**  
**Shared Learning on Shared Instruction**

North Network # 2 is comprised of 6 K- 8 schools, each with a student population in the 300 to 500 range, all with a similar socio-economic and cultural demographic profile. Two of the six schools offer instruction in French, employing an Immersion model. After analysis of their individual school and network trend data and a half day focus group session with their Literacy Teachers (instructional coaches) the leadership team members in Network Two chose to focus their allocated resources on building a process to support and enhance co-planning, co-teaching and co-reflection to respond to student need at the classroom instruction level.

Similar to their colleagues in Network # 1, the schools in Network # 2 had used Ontario’s School Effectiveness Framework (2010) to identify a network learning focus on using job-embedded and inquiry-based professional learning to build capacity, inform instructional practice and contribute to the culture of learning. After seeking the input and reflections of the Literacy Teachers, it was clear that some energy and time could be invested to leverage more focused inquiry into instructional practice at the classroom level that could meet the needs of ‘students to watch’ and to enhance the learning cultures at each school in the network.
Since the school teams in Network # 2 were already engaged is using the TLC as an inquiry and planning structure, they determined that they would focus their learning on Stage 2 and 3 of the Teaching Learning Cycles they had already initiated. A common problem of practice for each of the schools in network two centred on teachers’ understanding of the ‘Shared’ phase of instruction with the Gradual Release of Responsibility, an instructional framework derived from the work of Lev Vygotsky (1978), as well as Donald Holdaway’s (1979) research on scaffolded reading instruction. Teams of teachers and administrators were invited to participate in a short professional learning cycle that would see them collaborate with a team of teachers from another school within the network to use student assessments to identify an instructional need, create a shared to guided instructional pathway and observe each other as they provided instruction during the cycle, with a reflective process built in to the conclusion of the cycle.

Prior to our initial half-day session, the school teams submitted, a brief outline of what program area they preferred to direct their learning and the Provincial curriculum standards they hoped to target. As it turned out, forming small inter-school teams by grade-level, and area of focus, was not a great challenge. Each group worked together to develop their own working norms and protocols and then shared samples of student learning related to their focus. Some groups focused on developing higher-order thinking skills in reading, some on supporting students to write with greater sentence fluency or more descriptive and detailed language. Each group was required to deconstruct and articulate a common understanding of the curriculum standards they had selected. Teams were also provided with background information on the components of effective shared instruction, and given models of shared lessons as exemplars.

The second session was scheduled for a full day. Once again, norms were revisited and teams had the opportunity to see some video examples of shared reading and writing instruction, as well as the opportunity to explore a wider range of media and text resources to support student engagement in shared instruction. As expected, the Literacy Teachers and school administrators worked with the cross-school teams to develop the sequence of lessons, using a 5-day Shared Reading/Writing Lesson framework. Also, as expected, teachers engaged in a rich dialogue about teaching practice and the student responses they see to their teaching. Understandably, anxieties only surfaced when the group fully grasped the implications of the co-teaching and co-reflecting components of the process. Of the 12 cross school cohort teams, 4 teams committed to co-teach and observe each other teaching in each other’s schools. The remaining teams expressed their lack of comfort at the prospect that they would observe teachers from another school at work or would have teachers from the other school observe them. Each team did, however, commit to undertake the process with the members of the team that worked at their own school.

Observations and feedback on the experience has been, for the most part, positive. The classroom teachers appreciated the opportunities to engage in joint work with colleagues from other schools. At the network leadership level, the school administrators and literacy coaches have a more refined perspective on how this structure supports not only teacher to teacher collaboration, but also how the process supports the capacity-building of the literacy teachers and administrators. The third, and most important outcome, has been the insights the process has provided on the need for each school in the network to provide opportunities for their
teachers to engage in collaborative inquiries based upon student needs and; to ensure that these inquiries focus on developing more precise and personalized instruction for all students. In reality, that third outcome from Network #2’s joint work experience; the need for more personalized and precise student learning tasks, actually holds true for the teachers and administrators within the network. In a learning-focused school system, all stakeholders are learners who deserve student, community or professional learning that is precise to their needs and personalized to their wants.

**Reflections**

Carmel Crevola reminds us that “teaching is the art of reflection, not perfection.” The world we live in demands that we be both teachers and learners at the same time. Our growing understanding of how children learn and the rich array of text and technologies that are available to us require that we continuously reflect upon our classroom practice, assess the impact our teaching has upon student learning and adjust accordingly. Better these are carried out in collaboration, rather than isolation. Both learning networks used an inquiry-based common framework and developed norms designed to nudge teachers to trust in the good intentions, knowledge and skills of one another and use them to build some common understandings and language on their practice. Both networks have a new starting point from which to continue their joint work; defining student needs, developing a planned response that is informed by research, monitoring their progress and reflecting upon their learning.
APPENDIX

Figure 1 – YRDSB, 2010
Figure 2 – YRDSB, 2010
Figure 3 – YRDSB 2010
Figure 4 – YRDSB, 2010

REFERENCES


