

BEGINNING TEACHER LEARNING COMMUNITIES



INTRODUCTION

Which comment might you overhear from a beginning teacher in your induction program if you were a fly on the wall?

"I have so much to do this afternoon, I think I will skip the Learning Community. I find myself almost falling asleep! I know my mentor wants me to attend, but I am thinking about calling in sick."

Or

"I have a ton of stuff to do, but I can't miss my Learning Community this afternoon. I learn so much, and I get a chance to meet with my peer coach for problem solving. Today we are going to look at our student work. I wouldn't miss it for anything!"

While most beginning teachers seek and value opportunities for learning, they usually find themselves on overload—from lesson planning to extra curricular duties—often lasting into the night. So it is important that induction leaders provide Beginning Teacher Learning Communities (BTLC) that they find worthwhile. This practice brief offers some strategies and ideas that can be useful in creating and facilitating effective learning communities for beginning teachers.

RESEARCH BASED FRAMEWORK FOR EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Researchers have examined professional development extensively and conclude that teacher growth leads to improving student achievement, even closing the achievement gap. The findings indicate that in order for professional development to be truly effective, it must include five core features: The content focus may be most influential in impacting teacher growth. It includes both knowledge of subject matter and most effective pedagogy, or how students best learn that subject matter.

COHERENCE may be the second most influential feature. Coherence includes sustained learning that builds on teachers' prior knowledge, is aligned to standards, frameworks and assessments, and state, district, and school goals.

COLLECTIVE PARTICIPATION has the third highest impact. Teacher growth occurs best in a collegial and collaborative environment. It reaps the highest benefits when it is ongoing, job embedded, and includes meaningful discourse/inquiry. It can include grade level, school or district wide collaboration and mentoring to examine student work and plan lessons.

DURATION is correlated with increased teacher knowledge and more effective classroom practice. A one-time professional development event is found to have very little lasting impact. Effective professional development provides enough time to learn and apply the content, and is held regularly throughout the designated time frame.

ACTIVE LEARNING includes being mentored, peer coaching, observing or being observed followed by feedback and discussion, analyzing student work and assuming a leadership role.

This framework can be helpful as you create professional development opportunities for beginning teachers.

ASSESSING BEGINNING TEACHER STRENGTHS, INTERESTS AND NEEDS

As with good teaching, those planning an effective BTLC need to know the strengths, interests and needs of the beginning teachers they serve. Induction programs use a number of existing tools and strategies to do this, and many have developed their own.

For example, one induction program developed several formative assessment tools which are used during their beginning teacher orientation:

Pre-Assessment of Participating Teachers Interests, Strengths, and Areas for Growth, and Knowing Teachers Across Multiple Domains:

	Very comfortable			Not so comfortable
Classroom management	5	4	3	2 1
rapport with students	5	4	3	2 1
rapport w/colleagues	5	4	3	2 1
communicating w/parents	5	4	3	2 1
Lesson planning	5	4	3	2 1
Designing lessons to address Common Core State Standards	5	4	3	2 1
Lecturing & storytelling	5	4	3	2 1
Designing group-worthy tasks	5	4	3	2 1

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Pre-Assessment of Participating Teacher's
Interests, Strengths and Areas for Growth

What You Want Your Mentor to Know About You. Others include pre-assessment data such as interests and learning styles.

Regular beginning teacher formative assessment is useful in making course corrections to the curriculum. Mentor conversations, classroom observations and co-analysis of student work can gather current data of beginning teacher practice which is then analyzed for trends, to offer timely and meaningful professional development. When mentors are part of the planning, they can share their observations of strengths and challenges and create learning opportunities that are relevant and coherent. By assessing before and during the school year, beginning teachers are likely to find these to be valuable learning experiences.

SCOPE AND SEQUENCE

Although flexibility is important in planning the curriculum, it helps to have the scope and sequence clearly defined and articulated. An important consideration to keep in mind is the relevance and application of the content.

When planning the sequence, for example, a focus on creating an effective and safe classroom environment, including setting norms and procedures seems appropriate toward the start of the school year, and communicating with parents is important to address before parent conferences and report cards. Knowing the grade level, department, school or district foci can help make sure that the LC topics are appropriate and timely. It is important to know which initiatives, such as College & Career Readiness State Standards (CCRS) or critical thinking, are common goals. The Professional Teaching Standards can serve to frame the curriculum.

A consistent structure supports coherence. One induction program uses an agenda template that includes an inquiry (i.e., problem-pose/problem solve), a content piece, time for applying a Formative Assessment System process and closure/participant feedback. This allows flexibility while providing consistency. Each meeting of the LC is grounded by a review of norms.

Beginning Teacher Learning Community Working Agenda Template		
Time	Activity	Materials/Who Responsible
	Preparation:	
	Connect (i.e., Inquiry, Problem Pose/Problem Solve, Activities) • Purpose: • Activity:	
	Overview • Outcomes • Agenda • Norms • Housekeeping	
	Learning 1 Content (i.e., Common Core State Standards) • Purpose: • Activity:	
	BREAK	
	Learning 2- Formative Assessment System Process (i.e., Goal Setting, MSBY) • Purpose: • Activity:	
	Closure • Synthesis • Feedback • Forwarder	

Beginning Teacher Learning Community Working Agenda Template

If possible, LC can be scheduled for three hours and held at least six times over the two years of beginning teacher induction. This addresses the core feature of *duration*.

DIFFERENTIATION

Differentiating the content offers opportunities to meet the various needs of beginning teachers. A powerful and simple strategy for differentiation is to offer choice—of subject matter, grade level content, or pedagogy. For example, if the content is focused on CCRS, there could be choice session that focus on primary and secondary literacy and math. There may be sessions that offer choice of strategies to teach a concept to high school, middle school and elementary students. Choice sessions can include strategies for teaching students with special needs, English learners, and strategies for culturally relevant learning opportunities.

Differentiation is informed by analyzing the formative assessment of beginning teachers to discover trends in goals, needs, and interests. Choice sessions can be integrated into the content of the BTLC agenda. By addressing the varying needs of beginning teachers, choice sessions support *coherence*.

BUILDING LEADERSHIP CAPACITY

As mentioned, effective professional development occurs in a culture of *collective participation*. Induction programs aim to build teacher leadership capacity, with a focus on both mentors and beginning teachers. From the start, induction programs can structure mentor participation in all aspects of planning and facilitating BTLC. Because mentors have regular conversations and classroom observations, they can assess patterns of needs and interests. Mentors can model the quality of teacher leadership that is articulated in most Induction Program Standards. Mentors can facilitate the LC, including choice sessions. They can share specific beginning teacher feedback to refine the curriculum.



As the year progresses, beginning teachers can take on planning and facilitation. One program has teachers in their second year model effective strategies for teaching specific content in choice sessions, facilitate problem pose/problem solve, and be part of the planning team. It is important to be responsive to each beginning teacher's readiness and availability, encouraging them to take a leadership role however small, yet not overwhelming those who aren't ready. By clearly articulating the importance of building leadership capacity and a responsibility, collective participation becomes a norm of the BTLC and throughout a professional lifetime.

ASSESSING IMPACT

As the most important outcome of BTLC is the impact on teaching, it is critical that we have data that can show this. One tool for collecting such data is one that asks participants to self-assess their confidence, knowledge and skill levels in areas the LC addressed prior to and after it occurred. Analyzing this data can be extremely helpful in assessing impact, planning future agendas and guiding mentors in supporting their beginning teachers.

CONCLUSION

Planning and facilitating effective Beginning Teacher Learning Communities require time to thoughtfully plan, and assess. Given the importance of this component of comprehensive professional development, it should prove to be time well spent.

 <small>PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT TOOL</small> Knowing Teachers Across Multiple Domains <small>What goes around your mentor to know about you?</small>		
Academic Academic knowledge and literacy skills, subject matter knowledge, skills and abilities	What I want my mentor to know:	
Metacognitive Ability to reflect, self-assess, set and attain goals, manage time and materials	What I want my mentor to know:	
Individual Preferences Preferences in learning styles, multiple intelligences, interests, habits, aptitudes, emotional intelligence	What I want my mentor to know:	
Personal Content Sociocultural traditions, non-school literacies, home and community background, primary language, educational histories, perceptions	What I want my mentor to know:	
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Formative Assessment Tool Knowing Teachers
Across Multiple Domains

INQUIRY QUESTIONS

1. To what degree does the professional development your induction program provides beginning teachers align with the five core features that research has found to be essential?
2. How does your induction program pre-assess the strengths, interests, and needs of beginning teachers? What other strategies can you employ?
3. What tools do you use to formatively assess beginning teachers to refine and fine-tune the agendas and foci of the BTLCs throughout the school year? How do you provide opportunities for feedback from beginning teachers?
4. How does your induction program incorporate content into beginning teacher professional development?
5. How do professional teaching standards, induction program standards, or initiatives such as College & Career Readiness State Standards inform the scope and sequence of your BTLC?
6. What attributes of your BTLC support coherence?
7. How does your program's LC build the leadership capacity of both beginning teachers and mentors?

RESOURCES

- Desimone, L. (August 2012). Outcomes: Content-focused learning improves teacher practice and student results. *Journal of Staff Development*, 32(4), 63–67.
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- Garet, M., Porter, A., Desimone, L., Birman, B., & Yoon, K. (2001). What makes professional development effective? Results from a national sample of teachers. *American Educational Research Journal*, 38(4), 915–945.
- Odden, A. (August 2012). Resources: The dollars and sense of comprehensive professional learning. *Journal of Staff Development*, 32(4), 26–32.

CASE STUDY

HOW WE SOLVED THE PUZZLE OF CREATING VALUABLE BEGINNING TEACHER LEARNING COMMUNITIES

I greeted the teachers as they arrived for the beginning teacher after school professional development (PD). They were friendly as they greeted me, but most of all, excited to see each other. The room buzzed!

“How did your guided reading lesson go?”

“Did you try that new reading assessment? How are you using it in planning?”

“What are you using to track your students’ progress?”

It is incredibly satisfying to see a community of learners take shape. It was not always this way, and certainly did not happen by accident.

At the beginning of the year, the Chicago New Teacher Center struggled with Beginning Teacher PD, specifically, getting teachers to come to our events. We tried a variety of strategies to improve attendance: changing the times and venue, offering choices of topics to differentiate, holding raffles and giveaways, and coming up with jazzy titles for our sessions (such as *Morning Meeting Magic* or *Chatty, Chatty: Engaging Students in Discussion*). But none of these produced higher attendance. Ultimately, we knew that if teachers were going to take time out of their days to come to PD, they had to find value in it.

As a mentor with primary grade classroom experience, and a love of teaching reading, I decided to bring together a small, grade-alike group of teachers with a common focus. I thought back to my own experience as a first year teacher. I recalled that the PD that I found most useful included relevant content and time to collaborate with peers.

I decided the first topic for this group would be guided reading, something I was perpetually confused by throughout my first year of teaching. I was excited to see teachers responding to this topic—20 new teachers signed up! I knew that if I were going to create a strong community of learners I had to make this first PD a strong one. I carefully

wrote the session, making sure to balance input of new information, time to process, and lots of time for collaboration with colleagues.

At the end of this first session, I asked the teachers for feedback on how helpful this session was, and what types of topics they would be interested in next. Overwhelmingly, the feedback was that teachers found the content relevant to their everyday teaching, that it was useful because it was aligned to College & Career Readiness State Standards and that they loved the sanctioned time to be with grade-alike colleagues experiencing the same challenges.

I used the data I collected to align my next PD sessions with their feedback to demonstrate that I highly valued their voices. Topics of following PD sessions included going deeper into guided reading, using assessment to plan reading lessons and creating effective learning centers. With each session, I noticed I was talking less, and teachers were taking greater ownership in thinking about classroom application. The new teachers didn’t need me to make as many recommendations for implementation because they were looking to each other for support and resources.

I learned from this experience that considering relevant content, coherence, duration, collective participation and active learning really make a difference in PD outcomes and engagement. By continuing to be responsive to the teachers’ needs, the attendance at my PD sessions was consistent, and even more importantly, it provided meaningful learning experiences within a collaborative learning community of increasingly efficacious and thoughtful new teachers.

—Larissa Bennett, Lead Coach, New Teacher Center



TO DISCUSS A PARTNERSHIP WITH NTC TO TAKE YOUR INDUCTION PROGRAM TO THE NEXT LEVEL, CONTACT US AT 831.600.2200 OR PARTNERSHIPS@NEWTEACHERCENTER.ORG

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