

Teacher Collaboration

Professional Development from the Inside

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Teacher Collaboration

An Archetype

Rationale

Theory

Practice

Benefits

Challenges

Implications

An Alternate Archetype

Meet the Abits

- Expertise
They know the subject with uncommon depth
- Experience
They teach with consummate skill
- “Master Teacher” reputation
Mythical stature
Admired, revered, feared

Independent

- Trusted, a known quantity
- Hand-holding neither necessary nor desired
- Granted implicit license to negotiate their own way
- They may rock the boat, but not much — it's working for them

Idiosyncratic

- Find working with adults (meetings, including collaborating with others) ancillary to the real work of teaching
- Quirky, legendary

The Autonomous, Brilliant, Idiosyncratic Teacher ...

- A terrific asset to the school
- A powerful archetype
- A standard against which teachers, as well as prospective teachers, are measured

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You have managed to hire a
faculty of Mr. and Ms. Abits.

What do you lack?

Pedagogical Self-Consciousness

- Because they depend on intuition, reflex, and experience --attributes of a “natural teacher”-- the Abits’ techniques are often incommunicable.
They may not even understand the sources of their effectiveness.

Programmatic Coherence

- The Abits' fierce independence thwarts programmatic coherence.

They do not readily contribute to the development of a department's memory and archives.

Substantive Involvement with Colleagues

- The Abits' practices and stature make them unavailable as mentors.
- The Abits' practices and stature exclude them from the kind of reflection and revision that is awakened and supported by working with other adults.

A faculty composed of Abits
provides no mechanism
for even a very good school
to improve and adapt.

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Collaboration is concerned with teaching and learning

- Content: the subject itself
- Lesson plans
- Learning activities
- Assessments
- Course design
- Evaluation and revision of program

Collaboration addresses any and all pedagogical and curricular issues

- It is designed to support ordinarily configured classroom teaching
- It is particularly important for the core, required courses
 - They are foundational
 - They presumably express the program's principal aims
 - Most students, biggest impact

Collaboration supports the professional growth of the participants

- Provides opportunities to express doubts and concerns
- Allows a teacher to compensate for weaknesses and share strengths
- Expands a teacher's range and repertoire

Collaboration strengthens departmental programs

- Problems, missed opportunities, and alternate strategies are openly explored
- Expanded proprietorship of the program for each of its members
- Greater coherence

Teacher collaboration ultimately benefits the student

- It may address the needs of specific types of learners
- However, it is not focused on the needs of individual students

(Our schools have many venues for those discussions)

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Various Configurations

All of them consisting of teachers
from the same department
working in small teams

1. Same course, different sections

- Weekly meetings between colleagues who teach the same course
- Frequent informal exchanges
- E-mail conference

2. Out-and-out Mentoring

- Collaboration between an experienced teacher who is or is not teaching a course, and less experienced teachers who are.

3. Different Unique Courses

- More difficult
- Less-than-weekly meetings
- Requires more thoughtful leadership and planning

4. Summer Work

- Concentrated endeavor, three days to two weeks
- Paid
- Course design and redesign
(prioritize!)
- Overall articulation of the program
- Documentation of the curriculum
(Big picture to actual worksheets)

5. Presentations at Professional Conferences

- A way to share the fruits of the day-to-day collaboration with the broader education community
- (In ten years, dramatic increase in the number of presentations by Urban teachers.)

Leadership

- Veteran teacher and/or mentor collaborates with a less experienced colleague
- In a two-person collaboration of peers, who leads is moot
- In other circumstances, the main responsibility of the leader is to
 - Organize / solicit the agenda
 - Keep a record of the team's work

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Challenge and Renewal

- One does learn from experience, but unexamined experience can be of limited value
- Teachers cannot learn all they need to know about their practice from interactions with students

A Strong Program Gets Better

- Good ideas spread to other classes and teachers

(In the absence of collaboration, many good ideas leave the school with their originator)

- “Philosophy” is discussed in the context of the actual work we do

Course Corrections

- Collaboration facilitates necessary curricular change, and the archiving and refining of good material.
- Flaws in the program are more likely to be challenged
- Nuances, details, and subtleties are attended to

Effective Mentoring

- Younger teachers learn the tools of the trade
- Over time, they are offered a richer menu of models than in the standard one-mentor approach

On a more practical level, collaboration helps reduce the beginner's workload.

Mentoring — other effects

- Veterans gain energy, new ideas from their work with less experienced colleagues
- New teachers learn that even experienced teachers face challenges and difficulties in the reality of the classroom
- In the collaboration, they are trusted and respected as peers, an invaluable boost to their confidence

Department Bonding

- Collaboration meetings address the everyday needs of teachers
- There is no better way to build esprit de corps
- This solidarity pays off in enthusiasm and commitment to the program

Teacher Collaboration

—An Ethic and a Set of Practices

- Mutually reinforcing
- Slowly transforming

The benefits to teaching and learning accrue gradually

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Obstacles

- Teacher collaboration requires a change in outlook, not merely a change in policy
- Old school impulses — reluctance to work together, to make reflection a part of the daily work
- Scheduling and time issues

Points of Tension

- Generalist v. specialist
- Curriculum ownership by the teacher v. the needs of the common program
- Manners — kindness and support in the context of critical discourse
- Patience

The Teacher's Voice

Is collaboration homogenizing?

- Idiosyncrasy may be more appropriate in electives
- Nevertheless it remains important in the core — celebrate teacher quirkiness within common enterprise
- This is not unlike what we expect of students: strive for common goals, but strive distinctly

One Implication

This approach calls for and facilitates the practice of having all teachers working in the core curriculum.

(This may conflict with established habits, structures and expectations.)

Musical Chairs

- Content expertise and pedagogical savvy are assets
- But the feudal order is a liability
- A solution:
 - Experienced faculty share teaching the core
 - Less experienced faculty grow into more advanced (“plum”) courses
 - And everyone, all along, collaborates in the work of teaching and design

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Administrative Sanction and Support

- Validation, encouragement
- Time and schedule
- Trading some instructional time for collaboration time can yield a net gain

Department Chair as “Citizen-Administrator”

- A distinction between authority and leadership
- Change comes by persuasion rather than by fiat
- Failing to persuade, accept defeat?
- Fast is slow and slow is fast

Collaboration vs. Evaluation

- Both are vehicles for teacher professional growth
 - Evaluation happens once every few years
 - Collaboration happens every day
- Conflicting roles: evaluator and colleague
 - Yet evaluation must honor and assess the teacher as collaborator

Hiring

- A new standard: eagerness and viability as a collaborating colleague
- This expectation shapes but also limits the possibilities (in both hiring and retention)
- Training talented, compatible people without extensive experience may work better than hiring an A-bit and attempting to convert him or her
- Best case scenario: veteran teacher who seeks a collaborative workplace

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An alternate archetype: today's great teacher

- Has frequent, structured interchanges with colleagues
- Shapes the program not by archetypal force and reputation, but by design
- Mentors newer teachers
- Builds the archives—records and revises the music

A strong faculty accepts that the richest learning is occasioned not only by their intuition, expertise, and charisma but also by the design, reflection, and revision facilitated by teacher collaboration.

With their colleagues, the Abits become students not just of their disciplines, but of their practices in teaching young people.

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Independent School Magazine, Spring '03
“Into the Province of Shared Endeavor”

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