

Professional Development from the Inside

Teacher Collaboration in the Independent Secondary School

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Teachers in most secondary schools shape their curricula, design their lessons, and establish their expectations of students – all the while maintaining a happy remove not only from governing authority but from one another too. Success in teaching is often linked to autonomy; the greater the school’s confidence in the teacher, the greater his or her latitude and license. Hence an archetype we recognize not only in fiction and in film but in our very own schools: the Autonomous, Brilliant, Idiosyncratic Teacher – for purposes of this article, Mr. or Ms. “Abit.”

These Abits are a terrific asset to the institution. They are experienced experts and colorful characters – quirky intellectuals whose devotion to their subjects is richly complemented by such a wealth of practice in the teaching of them that they are often the most admired and loved of teachers, central to the students’ experience and imagination and memory of school. They deserve their “master teacher” reputation (if not their mythical stature). In any case, they are central figures in the academy, and the pressures they exert are no less palpable for being implicit: Abits are a standard against which teachers, as well as prospective teachers, are measured.

Let’s say your school has an entire faculty of these Abits. Perfect, right?

Well, not so fast. Ten years ago, our faculty was composed of highly skilled and committed teachers who, for the most part, worked independently of one another. They signed on for their share of the department's program, and most were quite avid about improving their own practices, both out of habit and through planned professional development. But the day to day exigencies of teaching and learning admitted very little coordinated collaboration, each of them spinning their own magic, or not, behind a closed classroom door.

In the years since, we've engineered a purposeful erosion of this autonomy in favor of the benefits and interesting challenges of faculty collaboration. This began when we sought to strengthen aspects of the core curriculum. First steps involved reform in our math program – the introduction of technology and hands-on labs, the use of cooperative learning groups, changes in curricular emphasis, and so on. The Math Department discovered that only collectively, working in small teams, could they grow and refine their own best program. Similarly, the English Department was initially concerned about writing instruction in the tenth grade. Over a two-year period the department experimented with working more closely together to shape and refine curricular changes at that level, and then decided to broaden stewardship for the program as a whole. This proves trying at times – still further commitments in busy lives – yet English teachers now collaborate in all corners of the curriculum.

Autonomy, we've found, can thwart the coherent development of the program. To the degree that the Abits are steeped in intuition and experience, their techniques are often incommunicable. Many great teachers do not possess the pedagogical self-consciousness to understand the sources of their effectiveness. Consequently, they do not readily contribute to the shaping and refining and archiving of a department's work.

In other words, archetypes may be useful as models but they're lousy as mentors and not particularly helpful as colleagues. The Abits' practices and stature tend to exclude them from the kind of reflection and revision that is supported by working with colleagues – hence the generous license often granted to such teachers – and a faculty composed entirely of such famously autonomous teachers, however effective in their private domains, provides no mechanism for even a very good school to improve and adapt.

The kind of teacher collaboration we have employed, by contrast, involves a practice by which a strong faculty can grow.

First, some orientation: a collaboration is constituted of two or more teachers who meet regularly to concern themselves with the details and interstices of teaching and learning, including:

- Classroom learning activities – sharing and analysis of the sorts of things students do in any part of a class.
- Lesson plans – sharing and analysis of the sorts of things the teachers plan for students to do in class.
- Assignments – review and examination of the instructions – papers, projects, labs, problems sets – teachers give to their students.
- Pacing – attention to the pace and timing of the teaching and learning.
- Assessment – review of student work, of the variety of assessments teachers employ to engender and verify learning in their classes.
- Course design – reflection about the large-scale design of the course, informed by all of the above.
- Evaluation and revision of the program – attention to the program as a whole, to the sweep of a department’s curriculum, based on and informed by the kinds of exchanges outlined above.

In addressing pedagogical and curricular issues in a systematic, regular fashion, collaboration moves a substantive portion of the work that most secondary teachers conventionally do alone into the province of shared endeavor. An art teacher says of her work with a colleague: “We brainstorm assignments, problem-solve, run ideas back and forth when we aren’t getting the results we hoped for. We maintain an ongoing criss-crossing of practices and ideas.”

This kind of collaboration is not to be confused for “team-teaching” or any other kind of unconventionally organized classroom. Rather, teacher collaboration of this sort is designed to support ordinarily configured classroom teaching and, indeed, it is particularly fruitful when employed in conjunction with core, required courses, as these

are foundational – expressive of the program’s principal aims – as well as, cumulatively, the most widely enrolled of courses.

Collaboration can take various configurations, each of them composed of a small team of colleagues from the same department:

- Same course, different sections – the easiest and most obvious opportunity for this kind of work is between colleagues who teach the same class. They might have a weekly meeting as well as ongoing contact via hallway conversation or email. At Urban, we try to schedule core Mathematics and English courses to facilitate such collaborations. Of her work in this kind of collaboration, one teacher says, “It keeps me on task, helps me plan practical lessons when I get absorbed in the lofty ideas. Interestingly, it also inspires me. While mulling over activities and texts, I become reacquainted with my passion for the literature.”
- Out-and-out mentoring – a collaboration between an experienced teacher who may or may not be teaching the course in question and one or more less experienced colleagues who are. Collaboration seeds a much greater involvement between colleagues than, say, handing over a binder full of assignments and lesson plans, which is more than many less experienced teachers get or can effectively use. One teacher recalls working with a more experienced colleague during her first term: “I visited his class, he visited mine, and he was able to give me lots of course-specific feedback as well as math teacher-specific feedback. The collaboration made the mentoring much more meaningful.”
- Different unique courses – a collaboration between colleagues whose curricula are distinct (a team our English Dept. runs is called “Upper Level Electives”). This is a more difficult kind of collaboration to facilitate; the common vocabulary and shared concerns are less obvious and less urgent, but the opportunity for reflection and analysis is no less valuable. Prompts are helpful: “Characterize an ongoing teaching challenge”; “Share the most recent assignment and your sense of its effectiveness.”
- Summer work – a concentrated endeavor that might last from two days to two weeks in order to examine the overall articulation of the program or to document the curriculum in its current gestation. A couple of members of our Math

Department have done this for several years now, with a little financial support from the school. This work has yielded a massive archive of our program content and our department policies, a living record of our accumulated wisdom, stored on the school's server and accessible from any faculty laptop at any time – an invaluable resource for new hires experienced colleagues alike.

No matter the configuration, collaboration takes discipline and organization.

Rudderlessness, redundancy, and/or lassitude can turn a potentially rich exchange into a tiresome gripe session. Teachers are almost too good at talking about students (and we have many venues for these types of conversations), and we can go on at great length about our teaching as well. Learning, by contrast, is an opaque, ineffably complicated subject made not simpler but perhaps more accessible through our sessions with colleagues. In collaborating we learn how to talk about our work as well as how to assess and refine it by more nuanced measures. Sweeping, broad-brush self-evaluations and end-of-term summaries give way to more circumspect, thoughtful consideration of the minutiae that shapes a course.

Secondary school teachers can be quite isolated. We are collegial but often not in a meaningful sense collaborative. And yet teachers cannot get all their sustenance from interactions with young people, and while one does learn from experience, unexamined experience is of limited value. A structured collaboration invites opportunities to express doubts and concerns; it is a forum for critical inquiry and fruitful reflection. It allows a teacher to compensate for weaknesses and share strengths, and, over time, it expands a teacher's range and repertoire. Unlike the ordinary vehicles for professional development – one time courses and conferences – collaboration is ongoing and invariably pertinent to the teacher's work because it directly concerns the work.

This is, above all, a change in outlook, not merely a change in policy. Teacher collaboration can be led but not dictated, as it is a fundamental alteration in what it is many teachers expect of themselves and of one another. Most of us have (and cultivate) old school impulses – a reluctance to work together, a resistance to making reflection part of the endeavor. We may think time apart from our students is ancillary. We may believe teachers' challenges are their own to resolve. And we all have problems with

time and scheduling; witness the high controversy occasioned by even modest alterations to the school's daily schedule.

Another point of tension concerns this stepping back a pace from the primacy of specialization. Expertise and mastery are deservedly prized in strong schools; it is not only the Abits whose success is inextricable from their deep and encompassing engagement with their disciplines. And yet the pendulum in many schools swings too far into the realm of atomized specialization, a circumstance we pay for in two ways: core courses are often under-attended to if they are taught at all by these more experienced teachers; and teachers have less of a commons on which to meet, work, share and grow. In our departments we've tried to engineer a movement from specialists not to generalists but to teaching across the core (all 9th & 10th grade courses, and many in the upper level) and collaborating with as much of our work as we can. The disorientation occasioned by having teachers move into new and unfamiliar courses is temporary, the advantages of having broader stewardship for the program as a whole ongoing. "This keeps our work fresh and alive," one teacher says. "It helps us continue to hone our approach and eliminate lessons that are tedious or superfluous." As with most meaningful changes in schools, the benefits to teaching and learning accrue not overnight but gradually.

What about the teacher's voice? Is collaboration homogenizing? Are the quirks and edges softened and blunted? Idiosyncrasy may be most appropriate in electives, in the kinds of courses with which many teachers are particularly identified, and yet it is nonetheless important in the core. The challenge is to invite teacher quirkiness within the common enterprise – to strive for common goals, but to strive distinctly. Content expertise and pedagogical savvy are, as always, tremendous assets, but the feudal order – in which a teacher's sole interest is his or her own fiefdom – is a liability. One solution is a kind of purposeful musical chairs in which veteran colleagues share in the teaching of the core while less experienced faculty grow into more advanced, "plum" courses – a counter-cultural prospect in many schools but so long as everyone collaborates in the work of teaching and design, a boon to the program as a whole.

Manners are important, naturally; collaboration demands of us a disposition of kindness and support in the context of critical discourse. "Like any relationship," a

colleague says, “it takes time and energy.” Faculty evaluations can become still trickier on account of the dual roles many senior teachers and department chairs must balance – collaborating colleague and teacher evaluator. Leadership is vital too, both administrative imprimatur as well as some deft orchestration of the collaborative teams. We’ve been fortunate at Urban to have the first – faculty collaboration is a principal consideration as we undertake a revision of the school schedule – and we’re learning to do the second. “Collaboration requires a careful setting of agendas,” a history teacher notes. “We not only have to carve out the time, but plan it.” A new standard is implied for the hiring process too. Rather than seeking a stalwart professional who expects to remain largely unbothered in exchange for fine teaching, we need to account for a prospective teacher’s eagerness and viability as a member of a team.

At best, teacher collaboration is an ethic as well as a set of practices – an expression of a faculty’s willingness and commitment to attend not only to their unique domains and disciplines but to their own growth as teachers, expanding and refining their repertoire of practices and deepening their understanding of the nature of student learning. A twenty-some year veteran: “My interest in math would have dried up long ago if I had not been collaborating with colleagues. I continually learn new ways of approaching a subject that, in some respects, has not changed for hundreds of years.”

Goodbye Mr. and Ms. Abit? Not entirely: in the alternate archetype we are proposing, the formerly autonomous, perhaps brilliant, and still idiosyncratic teacher participates in frequent, structured interchanges with colleagues, mentors less experienced teachers, and helps build the archives of the program – recording and revising the music. In a school that believes the richest learning is occasioned not merely by a teacher’s intuition, expertise, and charisma, but also by the reflection and revision facilitated by teacher collaboration, teachers shape the program less by archetypal force and reputation than by design.

Further testimony from Urban School Faculty:

“Often it takes more time to work through things with someone else. I know I could do it faster on my own, but there is a nagging voice in my ear that knows it will turn out better if I have other people’s input.”

“We are very different as personalities. She is more quiet and thoughtful, neat and methodical and planned, while I am more expansive, ambitious, spontaneous and unrealistic. We are honest and frank; we balance and temper one another.”

“Assignments and projects conceived in isolation lack the richness gained through discussion and collaborative planning.”

“Collaborating with my colleagues makes me feel an ineffable level of coherence within my department as a whole.”