



How to Encourage COLLABORATIVE LESSON PLANNING

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Teaching in the 21st century is no longer an isolated profession. Facing the challenges brought by the education reform and the growing diversity in today's classroom, teachers display a much stronger tendency to work collaboratively with colleagues to seek shared practical knowledge to meet various kinds of instructional demands. When working in isolation is viewed as a barrier to professional development and school reform (Flinders, 1988; Goddard & Goddard, 2007), many schools are organised to allow teachers to participate in Collaborative Lesson Planning (CLP), arranging teachers who teach the same grade level to plan together across curricular areas on a cycle basis, and implement the collaboratively planned lessons in their own classroom. Unfortunately, not every CLP team works well. Many school leaders started to believe that collaboration needs to be coached. As a consequence, there is an increasing demand for brushing up collaboration skills through not only workshops but hand-in-hand coaching and consulting.

Over the past ten years as an external change agent of supporting school improvement, I have had the privilege to work closely with many frontline English teachers, guiding them through the processes of understanding teacher collaboration and benefiting from it. As far as I can see, successful CLP teams do make a conscious effort to define collaboration and discuss the collaboration blueprint at the departmental level.

(1) Define collaboration

Not everyone finds collaboration necessary; school leaders need to define what collaboration is and what it is not. They should make teachers see that CLP is not just about making collaborative time available by scheduling designated sessions or sharing lesson plans with colleagues to reduce workload. Instead, CLP is a form of ongoing and job-embedded professional development as it gives teachers the opportunities to talk about students, contents, and teaching and, at the same time, learn from one another's practice (Flinders, 1988). It is worth discussing with individual CLP teams what they believe collaboration is and how they wish to practice it. By so doing, the idea of collaboration resonates more strongly with the teachers, and more importantly, the team members are building relationships and trust among themselves. Building a strong CLP team, bear in mind that communication and commitment are the fundamental factors for professional collaboration (Benade, 2017). An agreeable definition of collaboration, therefore, plays a vital role in the team's success.



(2) Discuss the collaboration blueprint

In most cases, teachers can hardly choose who to work with. Teachers' collaboration habits can vary enormously, depending on their personalities, workplace manners, and even the collaboration cultures in the schools they have worked in. For this reason, working out a collaboration blueprint that provides an overview of the elements to consider when deciding on 'why' and 'how' to collaborate is essential. Every teacher should be encouraged to express their expectations of CLP and how each member should perform their duties so that the collaboration could orient towards agreed and attainable goals. The senior leaders should listen carefully to teachers' voice before coming up with a list of "can-do" ideas. Some of them like "Maximize learning opportunities", "No free-riding", and "Be deliberate and polite when talking" may seem trivial, but putting them down on paper and displaying them can be of great help. It promotes clear communication, encourages keeping obligations and honouring contributions.



(3) Work out the steps in explicit CLP

Team leaders are strongly advised to work out the steps in explicit CLP to ensure that repetitive duties are performed according to the established order. The following responsibility checklists were specially written to stimulate teacher discussions at my coaching workshops. Making reference to them, many schools developed their school-based CLP steps, targeting at improving curriculum alignment and achieving learning goals.

I. Responsibilities for unit/lesson plan writers

- a. Read the textbook unit thoroughly.
- b. Decide on the teaching objectives regarding learners' knowledge (general and linguistic), skills (language, communication, and learning how to learn), values and attitudes.
- c. Work out the vocabulary teaching lists.
 - i. Core - to be assessed (meaning + spelling + pronunciation)
 - ii. Recognized - (meaning + pronunciation)
 - iii. 5** – (for elite groups)
- d. Decide on HOW students display their learning (assessment format).
- e. Decide on the input and teaching processes.

- f. Propose teaching activities that cater for learner diversity. Explain the design by stating the objectives to achieve, the steps and instructions and the resources needed.
- g. Connect teaching activities with the school/department major concerns.
- h. Draft worksheets and assessment tasks. (dictation & quizzes)
- i. Specify items and weighting for formative assessment.
- j. List homework.
- k. Distribute the unit plan and worksheets to team members at least 5 working days before they are used in class.
- l. Give teachers sufficient time (at least 3 days) to go through the materials before meeting for feedback collection.

II. Topics for discussion before adopting the unit/lesson plans

- a. Are the expected learning objectives and outcomes clear and appropriate? Is there any missing item?
- b. Are the teaching and learning strategies in line with the expected learning outcomes? If yes, try them out. If no, suggest replacements.
- c. Are most of the teaching activities taking a learner-centred approach?
- d. How will students respond to the activities? Why will students react in a particular way? (Prediction of student response/learning difficulties)
- e. Are the number of assignments and assessments reasonable?
- f. Are the assessment tasks and weighting clearly stated?
- g. Do the assessment modes match students' different learning experiences?

III. Topics for discussion after implementing the unit/lesson plans

- a. Were the learning objectives achieved?
- b. How did the students perform in / responded to the teaching activities?
- c. Were there any teaching activities failing to achieve the learning goals? What can be done to solve the problems?
- d. Were additional learning tasks/materials added? If yes, the lesson planner(s) should update the plan accordingly.
- e. Were there any follow-up activities for special issues/problems identified in any classes? What were they?

The above information is given for reference only. There is no one way to build a culture, but that success requires a shared interpretation of collaboration and a focused blueprint coming with an explicit meeting routine that relate to the system's goals. Strong cultures develop through repeated acts that become habits, which indeed take time. To speed up the process, it is significant for the senior leaders and middle leaders to demonstrate the collaboration etiquette that they wish to see so that the others could

model on (Benade, 2017). Besides, allowing everyone to say and listening to what they say with an open mind is critical to encouraging and sustaining collaboration. Remember, CLP teammates can be more than just the teachers at their own school. School leaders may always reach out to strong educational leaders for more advice and resources, for these professionals are skilful at informing teachers about expectations and responsibilities, particularly about the initiative and leadership required to drive change within their school.

Reference

- Benade, G. (2017). *What is professional collaboration and how can its practice be enriched and led to support student learning within and across schools?* Sancta Maria Catholic Primary School, Flat Bush, Auckland.
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