



IT WORKED!

Serendipity: Improving the Process of Collaborative Planning

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In my school, lesson planning was largely an individual effort despite the push from school and district administration promoting collaborative planning. In addition, typical lesson plans developed, individually or collaboratively, often did not contain enough detailed information to support comprehensive teaching and learning. Although the master schedule included time for regular collaboration at each grade level several days each week, this did not ensure quality planning was taking place. To provide more structure and accountability for planning, the district promoted the use of a resource that described eight components required within every lesson plan. Teachers lacked buy-in for this expanded type of planning, and often viewed this as unnecessary extra work.

To provide support for the collaborative planning effort and inclusion of the required eight components, I developed a planning tool to help organize and standardize unit planning. My rationale was that the resulting unit plan, completed collaboratively, would then serve as a resource document to be used when teachers completed daily plans. As teachers aligned to this collaboratively generated unit plan, more continuity would be seen from one classroom to the next, and information to include in the unfamiliar lesson components would be readily available for teachers to include in classroom plans.

When facilitating this unit planning process, I found that many teachers did not fully engage or contribute to what was supposed to be “collaborative planning”, and it was difficult to make progress through a planning session. Many teachers were not accustomed to true collaborative planning and had difficulty with the process. For others, the comprehensive planning brought forth aspects of teaching and learning about which teachers were less knowledgeable such as predicting students’ misconceptions and effective questioning.

I struggled with this issue of teacher engagement for several weeks, trying various ways to encourage more authentic input, but saw little success. Then, I encountered a conflict on my schedule that would prevent me from facilitating one of the necessary collaborative planning sessions for an upcoming unit. I did not realize it at the time, but this became the turning point in how I supported collaborative planning.

It was not an option to change the planning session because of the unit dates, so I began to think about how the session could move forward without me and still result in a viable unit plan. I talked with a member of the grade level about the possibility of facilitating the session herself, and she agreed to try. I created a written step-by-step guide to facilitating the unit planning process, and then supported the teacher in using it as she facilitated a grade level planning session with me by her side. The difference in the engagement of the grade level teachers was unbelievable! I was now the “guide on the side” and I watched with amazement as all the teachers truly worked together to create a unit plan. Astonished as I was, I knew the next test would be to see how this process worked when I was not present to support the facilitation. When the day of my planned absence came, the planning session took place as a successful collaborative grade level effort. The teachers produced a unit plan they could use to plan individual classroom lessons aligned to their vision as a team.

I believe the change in how (and by whom) the planning session was facilitated was effective in improving teacher engagement because it created a working group of people who felt equal responsibility for student success, and perhaps more importantly, an equal right for each member to

have a voice. When facilitated by me, it didn't matter how many times I stated that I was only there to support their work. The reality was that it was THEIR work and students, and I was an "outsider". Throughout the year, I continued to prepare planning documents, provide resources, and support teachers as facilitators. I also continued to attend collaborative planning sessions, but typically as a resource person to address questions about content and pedagogy, best-practices, and resources. My primary goal became supporting the teacher facilitating the planning session.

There was no magic involved in this shift in teacher engagement, and different grade levels responded differently to the idea of self-facilitation. It remained a work in progress throughout the entire year, and sometimes two steps forward was followed by one step back. However, the change in engagement when teachers facilitated for themselves was undeniable, and it created for me a different way to provide support for their efforts.

When reflecting on this process that was developed by accident, it occurs to me that it may have been more successful with more grade levels if there had been opportunities provided for teachers to share about the planning process across grade levels. Throughout the year teachers were very much in a reactive mode regarding the shift in planning, but putting facilitation of planning in their hands created more of a proactive response. Conversations about this may have been effective in helping them reach a proactive stage more quickly. If given the opportunity to do this work again, focused conversations about this shift in responsibility will be an early step.

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