Creating and Leading Cultures of Inquiry

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Laura is the author and coauthor of numerous publications related to organizational and professional development, learning-focused schools, and literacy development. Her selected publications include *Groups at Work: Strategies and Structures for Professional Learning*, *More Than 50 Ways to Learner-Centered Literacy* (second edition), *Data-Driven Dialogue: A Facilitator's Guide to Collaborative Inquiry*, *Making Mentoring Work: An ASCD Action Tool*, *Mentoring Matters: A Practical Guide to Learning-Focused Relationships* (second edition), and *Pathways to Understanding: Patterns and Practices in the Learning-Focused Classroom* (third edition).

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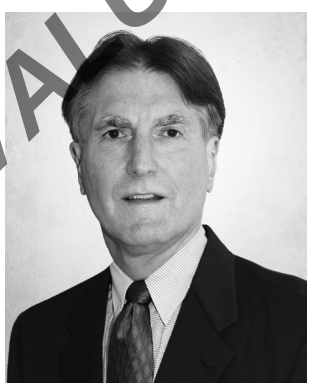

Bruce Wellman is codirector of MiraVia. He consults with school systems, professional groups, and organizations throughout North America, and he presents on the patterns and practices of learning-focused classrooms, learning-focused conversations, effective presentation skills, and facilitation and development of collaborative groups.

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Introduction

It is 3:15 p.m., and several members of the fourth-grade team at Gardenview Elementary are late, as usual, for the scheduled 3:00 p.m. meeting. They eventually straggle in, some with the materials for exploration, some without. Those without their class rubrics need to go back to their classrooms to retrieve them. After a few greetings and a few grumbles, the conversation gets started.

This week's facilitator suggests the members look at the student results for word choice based on the rubric they constructed for expository writing.

> "My class was all over the place in this skill set, how about yours?"
>
> "My kids didn't do very well. I think we should create word walls in every classroom to build vocabulary."
>
> "Before we do that, I think we should create some common vocabulary lesson plans."
>
> "Yeah, but we should include word walls in them."
>
> "And then we could give another assignment to see if the results are the same."
>
> "Why do we need to teach exactly the same way? I'd like to do more integrated vocabulary building, and we're not all teaching the same social studies or science units."

The facilitator struggles for the group's attention and says, "Wait, before we start fixing, we should look at all the rubrics."

But at that point, the clock strikes 4:00, and the meeting adjourns.

This group, like many struggling groups, is limited by its lack of structure, shared goals, and skill with collaborative analysis of data. Such teams flounder because they try to operate without protocols and because they lack the communication skills for managing sensitive conversations about student learning and current teaching practices. Often they are trapped by a narrow definition of data as test, state, or provincial scores, and as a result, the types of data they examine constrain rich, collaborative conversations and important discoveries about student growth. These data are too far from the local classroom and individual learners to stimulate powerful conversations about practice. Unfortunately, the pressure to produce growth—growth as measured by these scores in particular—drives the team to limit its collaborative conversations to these high-stakes data sources. Pressured groups then focus on targeted interventions and test-taking skills to move a few students from one level of proficiency to the next, not on developing deep changes that produce rich learning for all.

The Promises and Problems of Collaborative Cultures

As in the opening scenario, school teams confront three common dilemmas in their work with data. These dilemmas present technical, personal, and social challenges for individual group members and for the group as a whole: (1) committee without community, (2) time without tools, and (3) data without deliberation.

Committee Without Community

Being in the room doesn't mean individuals necessarily identify as members of the group or think of themselves as interlocking parts of the whole. Professional identity as a solo practitioner conflicts with a sense of collective responsibility for student learning and a commitment to collaborative exploration of data, options, and actions. Student results as a shared responsibility and instructional repertoire as a common toolkit are radical notions for teachers who view their primary workplace as the classroom and not the school.

Group members avoid tough-to-talk-about topics when they lack the relational skills to manage the mental and emotional demands of improving student learning. Moving from *my students* and *my work* to *our students* and *our work* requires clear purpose, safe structures, and compelling data that present vivid images of the effects of teachers' work. This shift from individual perspective to collective perspective is the heart of collaborative inquiry as teacher teams search for the patterns and practices that produce learning success for all students.

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Time Without Tools

Structural change is not cultural change. Simply altering the schedule to provide time to meet does not create conditions for learning or increase enthusiasm for the demands of collaborative engagement. Protected time without productive use builds resentment when group members feel that they are being kept from their real work back in the classroom.

Front-loaded training is a necessary but insufficient resource for developing fluency and confidence with the skills of collaborative inquiry. To institutionalize patterns of thoughtful practice requires the group's ongoing attention to goal setting, self-assessment, collective assessment, reflection, and redirection.

Data Without Deliberation

Data-rich environments in and of themselves do not produce robust improvements in instructional practice and student learning. Milbrey McLaughlin (2011) suggests:

> *A significant obstacle to the collaborative, ongoing, and frank discussions about data and student progress found in strong teacher learning communities lies in teachers' general lack of knowledge about how to understand the data available to them, how to develop assessments of student progress specific to their classrooms, and how to link data to action. (p. 67)*

Collaborative inquiry is complex and often stretches the capacities of many groups. When group members do not embrace a spirit of inquiry, habits of judgment and critique constrain both group growth and effective problem solving. As a result of these limitations, groups tend to simplify problems and apply narrow solutions, rather than embrace the messiness of tenacious issues.

Collaborative inquiry is a value as much as it is a skill set. Its true value emerges from the daily disciplines of practice, persistence, and attention to process. Skilled data use influences group development, and simultaneously, group development influences skilled data use. Patient and thoughtful groups learn to trust the process, their data, and one another.

High-performing teams systematically collect and use data to drive cycles of problem solving, planning, action, and reflection to both improve their own collaborative practices and improve instruction that makes a difference in student learning. Conversely, when teachers work in isolation without the grounding that data or collegial perspectives provide, they tend to rely on habit and make decisions based on anecdotal evidence and intuition. Some of the literature in the field of group development (see, for example, DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010) makes distinctions between the terms *groups* and *teams* and *collegial* and *collaborative*. In this book, we use these terms interchangeably to refer to professional communities that share common goals and view each other as resources for exploring practice and improving learning, using data to inform their conversations and decisions.

Although the power of data-driven collaboration is well researched (see for example, Louis & Marks, 1998; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001) it is often difficult to establish as a norm in schools. As DuFour et al. (2010) remind us, "A collaborative culture does not simply emerge in a school or district: leaders cultivate collaborative cultures when they develop the capacity of their staffs to work as members of high-performing teams" (p. 153).

What You'll Find in This Book

Got Data? Now What? Creating and Leading Cultures of Inquiry is a practical and accessible resource for confronting these dilemmas. It provides the strategies and tools for deep and deliberate work with data that turn struggling committees into powerful communities of learners. It is intended for group leaders—including instructional coaches, department chairs, team leaders, building and district administrators, and group members—who want meaningful and time-efficient work sessions that produce greater learning for all.

Got Data? Now What? draws from our work with professional learning communities, data teams, and grade-level, department, and administrative meetings. This book shares the lessons we've learned and presents practical, time-efficient methods for effectively completing tasks while developing productive collaborative relationships.

This book is based on the following five assumptions about group leadership.

1. **Assessment and feedback drive group growth:** Group development is an active ongoing process, not a result.
2. **Group development and task accomplishment intertwine:** Groups need purposeful structures and practical tools to learn with and from their data and one another.
3. **When groups change the way they talk, they change the way they work:** Thoughtful, systematic data-driven exploration of the results of instructional practice produces learning gains for both students and teachers.
4. **Comfort with discomfort is necessary for collaborative learning:** Willingness to navigate the emotional challenges of work with data is a key factor for group success.
5. **Patterns become habits, habits become norms, and norms shape behavior:** The real goal is to positively influence the culture of the organization. High-performing groups are vehicles for producing high-performing cultures, not an end in themselves.

We present a three-phase learning cycle—the collaborative learning cycle—which is a framework for using data to energize collaborative practices that improve student learning. Each chapter offers concepts, tools, tips, exercises, and a data story that illuminates the central focus. Each chapter also offers an Exercise Your Learning section with opportunities for application of the information in the chapter and an Extend Your Learning section with additional resources for further exploration. Visit **go.solution-tree.com/teams** to download the reproducibles and access the links in this book.

Chapter 1 presents the traits of high-performing data cultures and ways to purposefully develop and sustain learner-centered practices in schools. We offer an inventory for turning these standards of excellence into data for feedback and self-correction to produce ongoing improvements in group performance. The data story illustrates an elementary group applying data about its processes and interactions to refine and improve collaborative skills.

Chapter 2 presents a three-phase, inquiry-driven model for guiding productive group work with data—the collaborative learning cycle. Examples of purpose, process, potential, and pitfalls elaborate each phase of the model. We offer applications and tips for success, and we emphasize the importance of structuring group work and the liabilities that occur when scaffolds and skills

are missing. The data story illustrates the collaborative learning cycle in action as a middle school team works with data from a benchmark expository writing assessment.

Chapter 3 presents ways to frame issues for investigation. These fundamental choices direct a group's attention and data pursuits. We describe how expert groups use structured inquiry to identify gaps and successes and to clarify root causes before generating solutions. The data story illustrates a high school language arts team grappling with student performance gaps in reading comprehension of informational texts.

Chapter 4 presents fundamental definitions and descriptions of data types and uses with tips and cautions for choosing and using effective data displays. We offer approaches for data gathering including data that are presently available or archival and data that might need to be collected via constructed tools such as surveys or interviews. The data story illustrates an elementary math coach helping a vertical team consider possible causes for gaps in student problem-solving skills and identify formative assessment data to explore the issue.

Chapter 5 presents the group-member knowledge, skills, and dispositions that drive high performance. We describe stages of group development including predictable challenges, developmental indicators, and requirements for transitioning from one stage to the next. The data story illustrates a middle school team working with a group-development inventory to assess its growth as a team.

Chapter 6 presents distinctions between three essential modes of discourse in data-based conversations: (1) dialogue, (2) discussion, and (3) decision making. We describe common constraints to productive discourse and identify problematic and productive elements in six decision-making methods. The data story illustrates a middle school team applying effective discourse patterns within the collaborative learning cycle to improve a new behavior management program.

Chapter 7 presents approaches for turning decisions into productive plans for action driven by clear and measurable goals. We offer ten tips for avoiding common planning problems and addressing barriers to effectiveness. The data story illustrates a high school science team moving from making a decision to crafting an action plan for improving student inquiry skills across the science curriculum.

The Road to Learning

School improvement is not easy and quick. Data-driven change requires the commitment and perseverance of individual practitioners sustained by the focused efforts of the whole school community. Collaborative inquiry requires

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the vulnerability to learn in public, be patient with process, and suspend self-interest to serve a larger purpose. Groups that embrace these challenges, invest energy in their own development, and put data in the center of their conversations produce significant learning gains for themselves and their students.

We invite you to use this book as one vehicle on your road to learning. To accelerate your progress, use the exercises in each chapter individually or as a group study. Exploring the web resources will open further avenues for investigation. While at times the road ahead might be steep or bumpy, we believe the journey will both exhilarate and surprise you.

CHAPTER ONE

Developing Cultures of Collaborative Inquiry

In a rapidly changing world, the role of teaching and teachers has remained highly stable. Images from novels, old photographs, and movies portray instructors at the front and center of the classroom, delivering lessons to sometimes docile, sometimes unruly groups of students. When the backstage life of teachers is depicted, we see staffrooms filled with banter, gossip, and complaint. In these settings, social interaction with other adults is a way station offering respite from the arduous work of enlightening young minds.

Outdated expectations and structures cannot meet the learning needs of today's students. Data bounce off these entrenched cultures of individualism, cultures that maintain isolated pockets of both excellence and mediocrity in the same organization with no mechanisms for sharing and transferring success (Newman, King, & Rigdon, 1997). A cohesive approach to school improvement requires new ways of thinking about and structuring teachers' work. The emerging models of professional engagement rally all resources to produce greater *cumulative* effects on student achievement.

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Some teachers still perceive working with colleagues outside the classroom as shifting away from their real work with students. However, in this changing climate, collaborative interaction is, in fact, as much a part of teachers' work as is their time in the classroom with students.

Shifting Values, Shifting Cultures

As work cultures evolve, the underlying values and beliefs inherent in shifting models are in transition. Table 1.1 (page 8) describes four major value shifts. Each value shift encompasses a set of related beliefs and observable behaviors that emerge from these beliefs.

From Professional Autonomy to Collaborative Practice

In cultures of high professional autonomy, the dominant values are entitlement and individualism. A strong belief in privacy translates to closed classroom

Table 1.1: Four Value Shifts

Shifting From	Shifting To
Professional autonomy	Collaborative practice
Knowledge delivery	Knowledge construction
Externally mandated improvement	Internally motivated improvement
Quick fix	Continuous growth

doors, protection of turf, and a perspective that data reflect personal success or failure. These are cultures of *my*: my content—you can't tell me what and what not to teach; my book—you can't teach it; my unit—you can't alter it; my materials—you can't use them; and my students—you can't talk about them. In these cultures, the locus of change is the individual teacher. Teachers working in schools where this value is strong operate in isolation from one another, holding on to all of their personal strengths and weaknesses inside their private domains. Professional development becomes either a private choice or an imposed remediation.

In cultures of collaborative practice, the dominant value is co-construction of a shared knowledge base. The belief that teachers learn best with others drives the use of common assessments to inform individual and collective practice. Teachers share resources and strategies, successes and failures. They engage in systematic and ongoing experimentation and analyze data to learn from and with their students and colleagues.

In these cultures, the group is the focus of change, paying attention to its interactions and the cumulative effects being produced for students. Gap analysis and ongoing data exploration drive the professional learning agendas, not individual passion, interest, or the trend du jour. Professional development is a collective resource, not a personal prerogative. Peer engagement forges powerful links between teacher learning and student growth.

From Knowledge Delivery to Knowledge Construction

In a knowledge delivery model, the classroom is the domain of the individual teacher, who controls the learning. In this authority culture, there are right and wrong answers, and students are expected to passively comply. Teachers uniformly dispense information aimed at covering the curriculum. Failure is seen as the student's fault; an intellectual or motivational deficit. In these classrooms, isolated learners sit row by row, competing with classmates for rank and reward. Summative data are used to demonstrate success or failure. Assessment is done *to* students. Teachers record and report grades, and instruction moves on.

In a knowledge construction model, the purpose of education is to create self-reliant learners. In this social learning climate, knowledge is co-constructed; students are critical thinkers and collaborators in learning. Teaching choices are in response to student needs. Teaching is for understanding and application

of concepts and skills. Student grouping is flexible, based on skill level and interests, within each classroom and between classes. Colleagues invest in the success of all students. In this model, teachers use formative data to determine student growth and identify gaps to address. Students are full participants in the assessment process. Assessment is a tool for learning, and instructional decisions are based on learners' needs.

From Externally Mandated Improvement to Internally Motivated Improvement

When improvement is externally mandated, state and provincial agents develop and use data management systems to peer inside schools and publicly judge success and failure. Technical experts analyze data, identify gaps, and deliver prescriptions for groups to implement. Those in authority determine success criteria, how and when professionals should talk, and what they should talk about. This forced interaction disguises and ritualizes collegiality, as individuals sit together in the same room at the same time working on assigned tasks.

In this environment, the pressure to be accountable creates coerced responses, not thoughtful action. Teachers do not control how and when to measure learning and which data to collect and report. Assessment is something that is done to, and not by, teachers.

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When improvement is internally driven, teachers are choice makers, owning both questions and answers. They are confident and skillful data users, motivated to continually increase their skillfulness, seeking multiple sources of data and methods for exploring them. Shared responsibility for student success is the organizing value.

In this environment, collegial interaction amplifies the drive to share and spread effective practice, creating new ways to work with students and one another. Collaborative teams explore data for patterns and the root causes for success and performance gaps. Teachers share ownership for taking both individual and collective responsibility for growth.

From Quick Fix to Continuous Growth

In a quick-fix culture, short-term thinking and the need for immediate success dominate the conversation. This orientation results in short-cycle planning and implementation and intervention or remedial models. Improvement is about fixing what shows, going for visible, easily measurable results that don't require deep changes in practice. This approach to *gaming the system* (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009) focuses on raising scores by targeting instruction to those students who hover at the margin of success.

In a continuous-growth culture, improving the fundamental depth and quality of teaching and learning organizes the conversation. This orientation