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Threading Learning Experiences: Creating a Culture of Thinking for Teachers

My name is Heidi Jordan, and I am an instructional coach at Durango High School who was lucky enough to be included in this year's learning with the Cultures of Thinking Fellows. The work of this year's inquiry on *Creating Cultures of Thinking* has deeply impacted both my approach to professional learning and the community of learners I want to be a part of. Now I see how my facilitation of learning for students and teachers must thoughtfully integrate a myriad of forces with careful repetition, diverse points of view, strong binding agents, and genuine curiosity.

A former ELA teacher, I focused initially on the cultural force of interactions because of my work coaching the humanities. Many of the teachers craved support on how they could have students develop academic discourse where a true give-and-take of ideas and building on one another's ideas could flourish more.   Previously in my own classroom and in others', I found protocols like jigsaw or other thinking routines can fall flat when not facilitated for thinking. Yes, they provide equity of voice. Many times, though, I saw students just taking turns, merely reporting what they wrote, and then move on. They did not connect their ideas or reflect on what each other shared unless the teacher knew to prompt that. This year, instead, I experimented with using the Microlab routine. It fused both the equity of voice representation, as well as the time for reflection and then the discussion for making connections between texts or ideas. Finally I saw how to make consistent a structure for each person sharing their ideas and then for dynamic connections and thinking about their complexity to follow. Looking more at the interactions in my professional learning sessions, I also leaned more into the affect and actions of listening and pressing for thinking. Previously I had planned my learning facilitations with a no-wasted-time philosophy, but I found that I often had to rush through the reflections and debriefs. And doing so cut off the learning. Knowing that time is precious, I started doing with my adult learners what I used to do more effectively with my students: truly listen to their ideas, capture and reinforce them, prod

for more clarity, and engage the group in elaborating on the connections and importance as a whole.   In order to create stronger interactions between my learners, I learned the importance of planning with cultural force of time so that meaning making could be thoughtful, more collaborative in nature, and not too rushed for synthesis and opportunities to apply learning into practice.

As part of thinking about interactions, I asked myself when did I feel like I was a part of a community of teachers whose interactions supported my growth professionally? I recalled my years as a teacher in the Davinci School of Creativity and Innovation at Durango High School. Our small school inquiry goal was to grow the creativity skills in our students, and doing so meant growing our own creativity with instruction. I didn't realize it at the time, but Davinci was all about a culture of thinking. I mean, what else is a school of creativity and innovation, but thinking?   In those years, we created a safe space for me to take risks and explore ideas and practices, even make mistakes. During those years, we used planning and tuning protocols to plan and reflect on our teaching, and sometimes we just explored problems of practice together. Our genuine curiosity drove our learning. We also had daily gatherings for reflections and informal studying of practice. This frequent repetition of reflection structures was huge for moving our inquiry further. But it also showed me for the first time how diverse points of view could enhance the way I see my instruction. I learned more from physics and drama teachers than I thought possible, and the math teachers could help me think about different types of learners. This collaborative time was so impactful in my learning as a professional.

Since the abolition of our small learning communities, DHS has tried to implement tuning PLCs with our whole staff of 95 teachers but not had similar success. So , I wanted to look at the cultural force of interactions not just in the classrooms of the teachers I worked with, but in the interactions between the staff. I reintroduced tuning PLCs within the context of our year-long PLC cycle for the year. As part of my data gathering for these interactions, I asked teachers to name which type of teacher talk dominated their tuning sessions: Disconnected talk, Connected talk, Exploratory talk, or Inquiry talk. The data revealed positive interactions for the majority of the participants with 55% of the talk inquiry and 35% exploratory, a whole 90%--super high yield.

However, the comments accompanying the data highlighted a concern with my school's attempt to do too many things at once. PLC time was divided between learning concrete universal tier 1 instructional strategies in weekly one-time professional development sessions, along with other PLC topics that came up. The thinking experiences could not become "routine", and it didn't match the other experiences my teachers were participating in. Instead, I noted what we named as a "survival culture" since teachers constantly scrambled to run from one thing to another. I started to wonder how we could be building a culture of thinking for our teachers. Then I encountered the quote on principle 1 of the Cultures of Thinking in Action website: "For classrooms to be cultures of thinking for students, schools must be cultures of thinking for teachers."

I started to compare the success I was experiencing with my cross-district's invitational Cultures of Thinking work with the compliant tone of the school's attempts at professional development. This difference and my focus this semester has helped elevate a new passion for where I'd like to see professional learning go at DHS. Our district created a culture of thinking project with three cycles of learning for teachers to opt into. Our first cycle focused on the cultural forces of opportunities and expectations. Our genesis event included an in-person launch with Mark Church facilitating the learning, and we followed with another event of learning with teacher envoys--people who wanted to carry their inquiries into a larger context of school or district learning. While they dug into their own practices, they experimented with ways of facilitating teacher learning, frameworks for how adult learning can work, probing questions, and other protocols and routines for fostering a study session. In between sessions with Mark, I supported the envoys in planning study sessions, reflecting on their successes, and refining our facilitation moves, as well as reflecting on the participant data. In order to involve more people in the learning, we also designed full-day learning labs around cultures of thinking forces. In these labs, we incorporated classroom observations with a lead learner, professional learning to deepen inquiry, and time to plan for classroom implementation. I also built in coaching sessions with my participants to support their follow-through of these elements in their teaching. Over the course of this year, we developed our own culture of thinking across a cohort of learners. After one would

participate, they would involve other teammates, and the group continued to grow until it included whole content-area teams of teachers from the high school. This organic process began to reboot a culture of inquiry for groups of teachers. This dynamic group further contrasted the reality of my school-wide leadership and has caused me to wonder how I might develop such a rich experience for all my teachers, not just those who choose to participate in professional learning experiences outside their contract. What would DHS feel like for all its students if all the teachers experienced the power of this synergy? What moves can I take as a coach to make a difference that are palpable and grow so that building leaders can feel its value and see its impact on strengthening student achievement? How can I help them overcome their fear of taking a risk and inviting all teachers into this experience?

Since then, I've been working to develop a plan for professional learning that places teacher inquiry at the forefront of our choices. Now my tension lies in creating buy-in with leaders who haven't experienced what this can feel like and fear taking the plunge for the whole school. If I've learned anything in this process, it's that my role is to create a continuous thread with strong fibers that stitch together the learning experiences. I need to prioritize regular opportunities to reflect on how teaching experiences extend their thinking. Also, a teacher-directed, continuous inquiry will make the learning more personalized, and, thus, more owned and implemented. Centering learning around a common inquiry is even more important so that thought partners can lift up the work more than me as one individual can do. I've also learned that decisions based on data aren't sufficient: in order for teams to feel ownership of the problems, they need to make meaning of the data, have tools for thinking about it, and resources and TIME to dig into details. While every school has a culture, if we want to redefine our culture, we need to make time and space for this personalized journey to take place AND keep it sacred within the time and spaces within a teacher's day.

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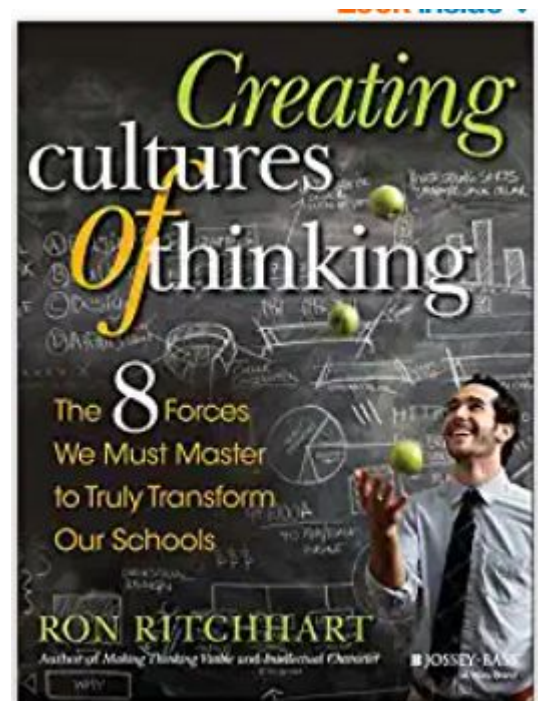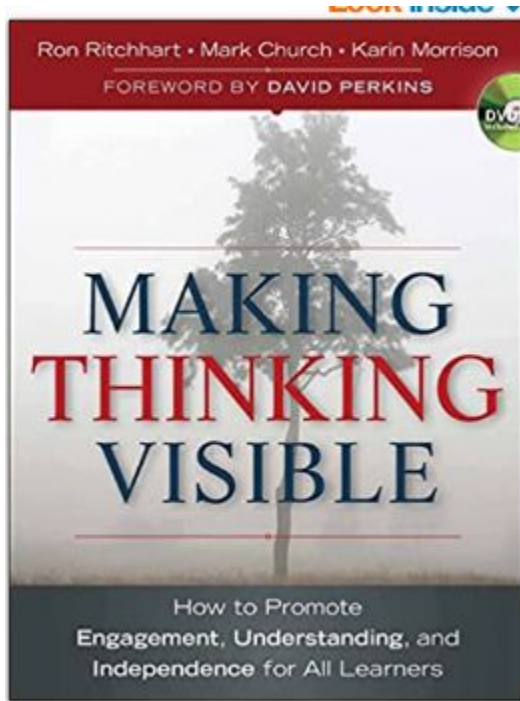
Interactions: from Jigsaw to Micro Lab

Home Group

Expert Group 1

Expert Group 4

Expert Group 3

Expert Group 2
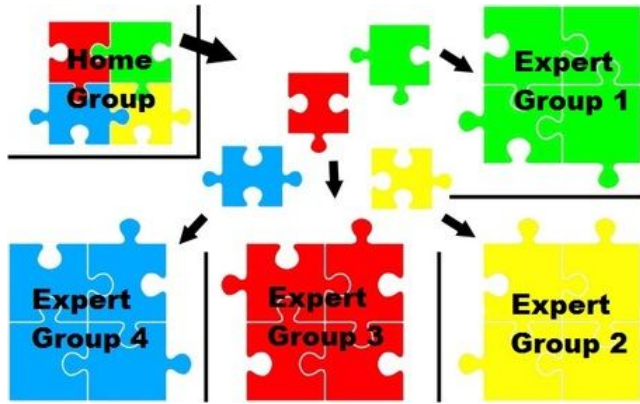
The Micro Lab Protocol

Reflect individually on the issue or topic being examined, then working in triads:

SHARE
- ☐ The 1st person in the group **shares** for a set time (1-2 minutes). The other members listen attentively without comment or interruption.

PAUSE
- ☐ **Pause** for 20 – 30 seconds of silence to take in what was said.

- ☐ **Repeat** for persons 2 and 3, pausing for a moment of silence after each round.

- ☐ **Discuss** as a group (5-10 minutes), referencing the comments that have been made and making connections between the responses of the group.

purpose This routine is designed to ensure equal participation and make sure everyone contributes during class discussion. It also helps to build active listening skills and the ability to build on and connect to others' ideas.

Synthesising & Organising Ideas

Interactions: Pressing for Thinking

DaVinci School of Creativity and Innovation

CONNECT

DISCOVER

CREATE

REFLECT

Teacher Talk

4 Types of Teacher Dialog in Professional Learning Contexts*

DISCONNECTED TALK:
• Teachers' comments are disconnected from each other and the group's collaborative purpose; teachers tell stories and give each other advice.
• Comments are authoritative statements or personal stories.
• When questions are asked, they are technical, procedural, or personal; meanings, assumptions, beliefs, and values are seldom questioned – and when they are, it's considered rude.
• There are few links to instruction.

CONNECTED TALK:
• Comments connect to an immediate task but don't build on other teachers' ideas.
• Evidence is used to justify claims, sometimes with artifacts, often with anecdotes.
• Questions are procedural, technical, or for clarification; meanings, assumptions, beliefs, values are not pursued collectively.
• Links to instruction are seldom explored.

EXPLORATORY TALK:
• Teachers build on each others' ideas with some pursuit of common meaning-making, critical comments, and alternatives.
• Evidence is shared, but it may be weak or unclear; questions are raised.
• Authentic questions emerge; meanings, assumptions, beliefs, values are raised but may not be pursued deeply.
• Some links to instruction are made.

INQUIRY-BASED TALK:
• Teachers' comments build on each other and dialogue spans meetings; teachers critique each other; alternatives are posed and examined.
• Evidence is sought, provided, and critically analyzed by the group, and new questions are raised.
• Authentic questions emerge from artifacts; meanings, assumptions, beliefs, and values are examined.
• Links to instructional practices are critically examined.

Based on the patterns of what you checked above, which of the following types of teacher talk MOST OFTEN applies to your group's tuning work during PLC?   ⧉ Copy

20 responses
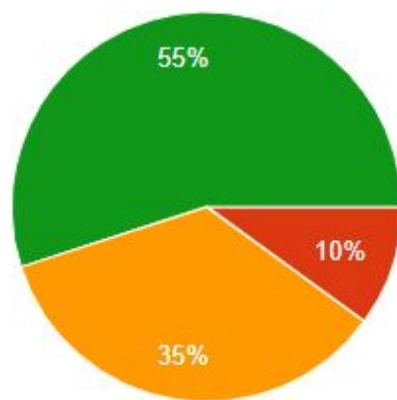
- 🔵 Disconnected talk
- 🔴 Connected talk
- 🟠 Exploratory talk
- 🟢 Inquiry talk

55%

10%

35%

Tuning Feedback Comments

The process never really had the opportunity to become routine. Having more frequent opportunities to discuss with the group would be nice (this was one of the few times for cross-curricular discussion that are built into our PD structure), but it doesn't feel like we have really had the chance to dig-in yet. Rather than trying to fit 2 tuning protocols into one session, and only meeting once a month to do so, I'd prefer to do 1 tuning protocol in a session, and meet more often. This would also allow for more "general" discussions / reflections / processing time to share with the group, and opportunities for "how are things going" kind of talk. With 2 tuning protocols planned for a single session, you are actually left with very little time to just talk with one another (and sometimes the most collaborative ideas and reflections come from just having the chance to speak with one another in a less formal / structured format).

The Monday PLC schedule feel jumpy and inconsistent. I think if tuning time was more regular (like maybe once every other week) and not just fit in with a bunch of other random things then that time would be more valuable and useful for teachers.
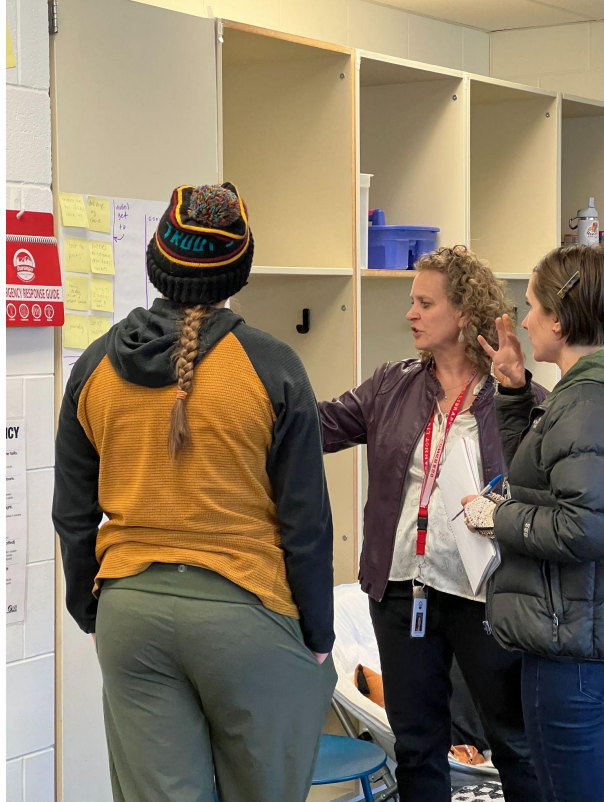
How might we reboot our culture?

Cultures of Thinking Study Sessions

Durango Learning Lab: Beyond Thinking Routines Opportunities and Expectations

Durango Learning Lab: Looking at Student Discourse Language, Interactions, and Time