

Harnessing the Collaborative Power of the Four Critical Questions of a Professional Learning Community

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With so many demands on curricular teams these days, collaborative time can quickly be sacrificed for coordination tasks such as scheduling events, casual dialogues of best practice, rote test modifications, and adjusting curricular pacing guides, to name a few. This kind of collaboration tends to produce shallow curricular changes, narrow instruction adjustments, non-timely remediation, and superficial assessment modifications.

To avoid this type of collaboration, educators should strive to engage in action-oriented inquiry about student learning. To achieve this type of inquiry, teams should engage the four critical questions of a professional learning community to guide their work. We know the four critical questions as:

1. What do we want students to know?
2. How will we know that they learned it?
3. What will we do if they did learn it?
4. What will we do if they didn't learn it?

However, as some teams experience, using these questions to their fullest potential can be tricky. The questions are more complex and nuanced than some teams understand them to be and thus resort simply to answering them with bullet pointed information and static artifacts.

In order for teams to maximize the collaborative impact of these questions, they must engage reflectively with each of these questions and use them to invite consistent and active inquiry about student learning. When implemented with fidelity, these four critical questions not only promote quality collaboration, but also create action-oriented inquiry around many topics such as common formative assessment, intervention, and grading. Below are some suggested alternative ways to engage with these questions:

1. What is it we want students to learn and be able to do?

Teams that approach this question from the perspective "*How well do students need to perform [this skill or knowledge]*" can avoid simply discussing themes and topics to be covered and instead focus on the aspects of quality in student work, as well as focus on patterns of student proficiency.

Educators know that learning starts with clear and viable expectations. However, in order to be clear and viable, these expectations must outline not only '*what*' students must learn and do but also '*how well*' they must learn and do it! When a team calibrates not only *what* a student must do but also *how well* a student must do it, the resulting collaborative conversations become centered on ideas such as evidence-based grading, student-involved feedback, common formative assessment, and student growth.

2. How will we know if each student is learning?

Some teams continue to approach this question from the perspective of *“What are the topics/content covered by the assessment and how many questions do the students have to answer correctly to be considered proficient?”*

It is more collaboratively effective to approach this question through the lens of *“Do the assessments produce enough of the right evidence?”*

Through this lens, teams can collaborate more deeply around assessment, asking questions such as, *“Did the assessment only collect outcomes (right or wrong answers)? Did the assessment collect student thinking patterns and context (misconceptions and logic patterns)? Did the assessment seek out student dispositions (confidence levels)? Did our assessments work in unison to show student growth?”*

In fact, Thomas Guskey highlights this same point when he defines assessment as *“any process used to gather information about student learning; that is, what students know, are able to do, and believe at a particular point in time”* (pp. 17 Guskey & Jung 2013).

In other words, *“Did we collect all the evidence needed in order to form the most accurate learning profile of a student...answers, thinking, and dispositions?”*

By leveraging this critical question in this manner educators can begin to create assessments that produce more reliable evidence, which in turn allows a team’s *reaction* to student learning to be more reliable as well.

3 & 4. How will we respond when students do not acquire the intended knowledge and skills? And how will we respond when students are already highly proficient in the intended knowledge and skill?

It is easy for collaborative teams to take the pronoun ‘we’ in this question to simply mean ‘the teachers.’ However it is more collaboratively effective to approach this pronoun from a ‘teacher and student’ perspective. To achieve this perspective teams must ask, *“Is there a co-constructed response to a student’s learning in the course?”*

While some teachers invite co-constructed responses through formative and self-assessment structures, few teachers go as far to include the student in the feedback process. Co-constructed feedback is a process that invites the students to be the first to review, the first to think about, and the first remediate their work while the teacher reflectively guides them toward the expected proficiency. This results in both the teacher *and* student making proactive and real-time decisions about a student’s deficits.

Collaborative teams that embrace a co-constructed response framework promote active student learning that can potentially lead to higher rates of feedback acceptance, as well as the development of self-efficacy.

Interacting with each of the four critical questions in the manner outlined above can have a lasting collaborative impact which can be observed through evidence-based grading conversations, innovative tier 1 and tier 2 interventions, and real time, reflective data dialogues...and many more.

Resources: Guskey, T., & Jung, L. (2013). Answers to essential questions about standards, assessments, grading, and reporting. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Corwin Press.