

BYRAM HILLS CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT  
ARMONK, NEW YORK

GROWTH PLAN END-OF-YEAR REPORT

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**Title:** Applied Action Research Summary of Learn to Inspire

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**Year:** 2010-2011

**School/Grade:** Byram Hills, Grades 9-12

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SUMMARY OF ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

**Context**

I am a school counselor at Byram Hills High School, and I have worked in our district for almost five years. I took on the challenge of being my department's learning communities facilitator in the fall of 2009. Before I began this position, I was acutely aware of how the existing technology-focused learning community structure was not meeting the professional development needs of our department. Since we do not use instructional technology in our work, we often felt as if our professional needs, and those of other support staff, such as the school psychologist, were not being well met. My fellow counselors and I wanted to engage in productive professional learning and improve our work with students, but we simply did not have a structure that would enable us to accomplish this goal effectively.

I decided after one year as a facilitator to design and propose a new model. I want to make clear that my inspiration for doing so was as much humanistic as it was practical. My colleagues and I felt frustrated, bored, and ultimately obliged to engage in a form of subterfuge; we saw our only way of "surviving" in the existing structure was to make it look as if we were learning when in fact we were not. I soon realized that what we needed was a new way forward that would give us the opportunity to put our hearts back into our own professional learning.

To create an alternative model that would enable us to engage in genuine collegial inquiry, I needed to begin with the most important question of all: "Why?" What would be the *purpose* of any new model? I knew the answer could not be lifted from a book; it had to be real for us. Our purpose would be to search for truth. We would do this primarily by identifying an educational challenge, studying it, and improving counseling, teaching and learning based on what we learn, but ultimately our goal would be to seek the truth as it reveals itself in our unique relationship to students and to each other.

A definite challenge lay ahead, but I decided to trust my colleagues and the process. I recalled Peter Senge's words in *The Fifth Discipline* (2006) where he states, "...the creation of learning communities is a natural process that does not need to be controlled or manipulated – indeed, attempts to control it can easily backfire." Taking Senge's words to heart, I decided that instead I would offer only basic guidelines, and let the group choose the research question and format that best suited their learning needs. This approach required me to trust that

BHHS teachers and counselors would willingly engage in the task of collegial inquiry to improve teaching and learning. While I was slightly apprehensive at first, I saw this action as a way to affirm a core belief: My colleagues and I chose our profession because we love children, love learning and derive deep satisfaction by inspiring students to discover what is best in themselves. In a very real way, participation in LTI was an act of faith in one another and in this remarkable human endeavor we call learning.

### **Action Plan**

When I began to develop an action plan for my study of LTI, I decided I would answer the research question “Is LTI an effective professional development experience?” by measuring changes in participants level of knowledge of their topic and whether or not they could use what they learn to improve their practice. While I chose these research sub-questions primarily to keep my investigation manageable, I soon realized that I needed to expand them to ensure that my primary research question could be answered affirmatively with a reasonable degree of confidence. Thus, two sub-questions became four with the addition of “Would participants consider participating in LTI in the following school year, and would participants recommend LTI to a non-participating colleague?” To answer “yes” to my main research question, I adopted the following criteria based on my sub-questions:

By the end of the LTI experience, a *majority* of participants would:

- Report an increase of knowledge of their chosen group topic
- Consider participating in the same LTI group in the following school year
- Recommend LTI to a non-participating colleague
- Believe that they will be able to apply their new knowledge to improve work with students

As part of my action plan I assessed participants’ level of knowledge of their topic at the beginning of the study, informally interviewed participants throughout the process, and developed and administered a formal anonymous online survey (Appendix A) at the end of the school year. The data I collected is quantitative and qualitative. Conducting this research offered me the opportunity to learn to use an online survey tool called Survey Monkey that proved invaluable not just to this study, but also to one of the LTI groups.

LTI operated two groups this year. One group studied *student anxiety*, and the other 8<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> *grade transition*. The transition group had seven members, and the student anxiety group had nine. Both were interdepartmental and included teachers, counselors, special educators and a school psychologist. The diversity added greatly to the strength of the professional development experience. Several members commented to me during interviews that working with colleagues from different departments and with different roles in the school enabled everyone in the group to attain far greater perspective and understanding of the group topic.

### **Results**

After analyzing the data, I can reasonably conclude that LTI is an effective professional development model. Twelve out of fifteen LTI members participated in the survey. All of the respondents reported that their level of knowledge of their topic had increased, and that they would consider participating in LTI next year. Eleven of the fifteen respondents (92%) reported that they would recommend LTI to a colleague who did not participate this year, and the same

number reported that they felt they would be able to apply the knowledge they gained this year to improve their work with students.

In addition to direct questions, LTI members were also encouraged to comment on their experience. Their comments were insightful and honest. The following examples align with my research questions and support the effectiveness of the LTI model:

*The experience has been rewarding, and it will definitely shape the way I approach the beginning of next year. In the future, I'd like to take a closer look at the assessments used in the middle school. Reshaping the first quarter assessments for 9<sup>th</sup> grade students might be a pedagogically sound move.*

*LTI was an opportunity to work collegially on a topic that has often presented itself as problematic for our students. To have the ability to discuss this issue, develop a survey to gain more information about the topic and then share our findings has been an invaluable experience. I hope to either continue this work next year or develop a new topic of study.*

Opportunity was also provided on the survey for critical feedback. The responses suggest that a designated leader or “point person” would enhance cohesion and progress. There also seems to be a need to improve the rigor of the research design and to make a better connection between a group’s findings and how those findings can be practically applied to improve teaching and learning.

## **Conclusion**

The most important realization I had through this research is that learning—in this case adult learning—is an organic part of the human experience that can only be fostered, not forced. Even in the context of “mandated professional development”, participants will engage only to the degree that they have a stake in their learning, and that it has meaning for themselves and their professional practice. One LTI member captured this well when he stated, “I felt that we were treated as professionals and not mandated to produce for the sake of production...It was driven by smart, interested and dedicated teachers...” Ownership of the learning process is critical to effective professional development.

While hard survey data is valuable, there are also intangible or *soft* elements of the LTI experience that are of equal importance. At the beginning of the year when the groups first met, there was an immediate sense of camaraderie and a feeling that the LTI model had created “breathing room” for greater inquiry and creativity. While each group member was accountable to share in the work, there was always laughter, lively debate, sharing of experiences and perspectives, and a deep sense of mutual respect. I particularly remember one session when someone in my group said, “I never looked at it that way before”. Several times during our time together I had the same experience of a broadening of my own understanding. As members shared their various experiences and perspectives, I felt that my *educational vision* had dramatically improved. I could see and understand things about my practice that would be impossible had I been working in isolation or only with members of my department. Such moments reaffirmed to me that learning is as much the drawing out of what is best in an individual as it is the addition of new information. It requires each of us to step courageously out of our own particular experience and venture into the experiences of our students and one another.