BYRAM HILLS CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT
ARMONK, NEW YORK

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Title of Project: *The Elements of a Student Learning Community*

Year: 2013-2014

School/Grade: H.C. Crittenden Middle School/ Grade 6

SUMMARY OF *INVESTIGATORS OF PRACTICE* ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

Context:

 I have been a sixth grade social studies teacher in the Byram Hills School District since 1992. There are approximately 200 students in the grade this year and I am assigned to half of them, while my colleague Sheila St. Onge is assigned to the other half. We have been co authoring/designing every lesson together for 22 years. The New York State Social Studies Framework (Revised April 2014) is what drives the content and skills that we teach. Our lesson design follows the Grant Wiggins backward design model, which involves first identifying the (NYS SS Framework) skill/content to be taught/learned, and then requires the creation of learning activities and essential questions with the goal being student acquisition of these skills and content. Moreover, we have an essential question which serves as overarching guidance and focus for the year. It is: How do geography, economics, government, religion and/or belief systems, and history impact culture? By the end of each academic year, Sheila and I feel confident that every 12 year old child has the ability to think deeply about each term in the question, and is able to answer the question independently utilizing critical thinking skills.

I was very much intrigued by the idea that the students I serve are really only at the very beginning of the lengthy career they will experience as learners. Grade six is the first year they receive grades on a report card (versus rubric scores 1-4 or anecdotal summaries). I wanted my students to understand that they are in charge of their learning, and how can I play a role (as their facilitator) in granting them what they need in order for them to learn most optimally and with individual ownership. This idea is also timely as it relates to where sixth graders are developmentally: it is crucial that they begin to play an active role in their own learning as that is the next step in their psychological development.

Action Plan:

The focus of my research this year was finding answers to the question: What are the elements of a Professional Learning Community (PLC) and how can they be practiced in a classroom setting or Student Learning Community (SLC)? I was able to perform research this year due to the fact that I have a system in place (described above) that is embedded with best practice, rigor, collegiality, and the incorporation of the frequently revised New York State Standards; thus leaving "room" in my professional year to conduct action research.

There were several pieces of literature I read including <u>The Secrets of Facilitation</u> by Michael Wilkinson, <u>Quiet</u> by Susan Cain, "Using common planning time to foster professional learning", published in <u>The Middle School Journal</u>, September 2013 issue and " 'Strengthening the Student Toolbox' Study Strategies to Boost Learning" <u>American Educator </u>Fall 2013). The facilitation guidebook had ideas including:

> *The word facilitate comes from the word "facile" or to make easy. We need*
> *to make the questions we ask "seem" easy. Visual questions are best. If you*
> *need to know what a(student)knows, <u>start with an image building phrase</u>,*
> *extend the image with at least 2 phrases, and then end with a more "type A"*
> *question (language we typically use in the science of education or industry).*
> *So plan your "type B's" ahead of time. Plan it for every agenda item, be it for*
> *a parent conference, small or large group discussion/classroom lesson, or*
> *teacher planning meeting.* (See Appendix A for illustration.)

In other words, one of the most basic ways to empower students as learners is to make learning "seem easy," and to create agendas for them to follow no matter how small the lesson or activity.

The idea of setting and using agendas was also supported in the article "Using common planning time to foster professional learning," published in <u>The Middle School Journal</u>, September 2013 issue. I paraphrase here:

- *There is a vast difference in what Common Planning Time (CPT) means and what*
  Professional Learning Communities (PLC) mean. Basically the latter is more productive,

empowers teachers, and addresses the "resisters" (author's language) and tangential conversations that do not beg for productivity.

● *By establishing norms that solicit collaboration and community in the classroom, I am thinking that all kids will "buy into" their learning. Perhaps I can create a time each day for an agenda item that the kids themselves would like to experience or happen. It could be anything from review for a test to what are you doing this weekend, or showcasing a talent in the room, or maintaining a "curiosity board". It wouldn't have to be whole group, either, it could be a "turn to your partner and share" moment.*

● *The article mentions that focus can veer off of academic issues to social and behavioral issues if the agenda is not clear and does not include ideas from the whole group. They call it "sustained engagement," where the group of learners are proactive leaders instead of reactive onlookers.*

● *The article also articulates how the practice of collaboration does not just materialize on its own. Initial training in the nature of SLC (student learning communities) leads to a motivation to work together versus the lack thereof. It requires shared knowledge, respect for one another, and openness to one another's suggestions. Lack of trust and fear of ridicule or exclusion can lead to reluctance to participate.*

From reading the article "'Strengthening the Student Toolbox' Study Strategies to Boost Learning" (American Educator Fall 2013), I wondered (regarding creating a SLC) *do we teachers ever allow students to lead the learning community? If their "jobs" are to complete our assignments and do well on assessments, do we ever allow them to work together on homework or choose a study method to use during a class lesson that finds the students in small heterogeneous groups working on an activity or lesson of choice?* In other words, if their "jobs" entail doing their best academically, how can I create an atmosphere in the classroom that meets their needs?

During December 2013, I began reading the best seller, Quiet, by Susan Cain which is about the idea that one- third of any given population is introverted versus extroverted and the power they have in a world that "...can't stop talking." Questions I began to form while reading the book included:

● *Does it always make sense to equate leadership with hyper-extroversion?*
● *If we assume that quiet and loud people have roughly the same number of good (and bad) ideas, then should we be concerned if the louder and more forceful people carry the day? This would mean that an awful lot of bad ideas prevail while good ones get squashed! Yet*

studies in group dynamics suggest that this is exactly what happens. We perceive talkers as smarter than quiet types-even though GPAs and SAT and intelligence test scores reveal this perception to be inaccurate.

- *Wharton Management professor Adam Grant had a theory that extroverted leaders enhance group performance when members are passive, while introverted leaders are more effective when workers are proactive.*
- *Thus, extroverted leaders may wish to adopt a more reserved, quiet style, so they may learn to sit down while others stand up.*

Results:

I was observed formally by my department chair, Jen Laden. I had designed a lesson to carry out some of the findings I had gleaned from IOP research throughout this year. My intent was to remind the children that they are "in charge of their own learning" and have a myriad of choices as how to study and prepare for their classes each and every day. I showed them the Study Methods graphic organizer that I created as part of the Grade Six Social Studies Handbook. On it are at least 10 ideas on how to approach their studying. It was a great review and chance to see if and when they use each method.

Next I organized the classroom into stations where some of the study methods would be practiced. One station was correcting the after side of their before and after sheet on ancient Greece. Another was correcting the graphic organizer study guide they had done the night before for homework. A third was an opportunity to complete quiz corrections on a pop quiz they had taken earlier in the week. A forth was a Q and A with me. Some groups had time left over where they had a free choice on how to prepare. Some started to create a fake test while others quizzed each other verbally. The following quotes were obtained from some of the students who experienced the lesson:

"It was easy and relaxed as we got to study."
"It felt great. I was very happy."
"I really liked this activity because it really helped me to study for the test. It gave me different choices to choose from to help me do my best on the test."
"I liked the different choices we had instead of the regular lesson. I also liked that it was more interactive."

My department chair found the most notable strengths of the lesson to be:
- *Respect and Rapport*
- *Communicating with Students*

This feedback reflects two of the most important characteristics a good classroom teacher (or SLC facilitator) should have if she/he is searching for success/best practice.

Implications:
I hope to offer this model as either an exploratory class model or test review model next year. The kids seemed excited to partake, although I felt it was a little frenetic at times. It is worth noting that the exceptionally quiet kids were listened to, engaged, and had a Q and A with me where they weren't quiet in the least. My department chair noted in her written observation that those kids could be called upon to run a Q and A station of their own. Ultimately I believe the lesson plan model is a highly intellectual one and is worth utilizing moving forward.

It is my recommendation that all education majors should be required to read Quiet. The book's content forces the classroom teacher not only to "see the unseen" but forces her to question how to actively and purposefully engage them.

Appendix A

"The ability of a group to respond to a question is significantly affected by the quality of the question the facilitator asks. The starting question is much like starting a fire."

Question type A: The first thing we want to talk about is inputs. What are inputs to the rubric making process?

Question type B: If you were about about to create a rubric for a social studies project, what information would you need to have close by?

Why is the Type B Question Better?

- uses student language
- more personal language; addresses the students directly
- Action oriented ("about to create")
- Open ended ("what information")

source: The Secrets of Facilitation by Michael Wilkinson 2012