Facilitating Teacher Study Groups

Sharon Walpole, Associate Professor, University of Delaware
Katherine A. Beauchat, Doctoral Candidate, University of Delaware

When was the last time you identified a goal that you planned to accomplish through self-selected, self-directed commitment, study, and action? Think about a New Year's resolution you have made for a healthier diet or more exercise. If you are like us, experiences when we work alone yield low returns because we are not always motivated to follow through. Have you, like us, however, been more successful when you joined a group?

Now think about the power of shared experiences with texts. J. K. Rowling's texts cause parents to allow young teens to stand in line at bookstores at midnight–and then actually purchase more than one copy of the same hardback book–and then read all night! Oprah Winfrey, whose famous adult book club began in 1996, is now a virtual rainmaker in the publishing industry; her selections are instant best sellers, no matter now dense or obscure. Scores of adults faithfully combine learning with fellowship in monthly book clubs, sometimes reading nonfiction tomes they would never have tackled without the support of the group. We hazard a guess that it is the shared experience, rather than the characteristics of the texts themselves, that maintains momentum in these adult book clubs. That shared experience includes respect, choice, voice, and personal connections. We are learning to harness those characteristics of shared experience as we engage with teachers in extended study groups; in this brief, we will share what we have learned in our work and from the work of others.

Although literacy coaching means many different things, all coaching initiatives have one common commitment: the goal of building teacher expertise. In our work as coaches and with coaches, we have relied on teacher study groups as a main strategy for accomplishing this task. Our understanding of the potential for study groups has expanded over time; our current vision combines ideas from real-world book clubs with ideas from the adult learning and professional development literature, and then adds a dash of compassion for the complex and difficult world of everyday teaching. This recipe yields a flexible set of recommendations that can help coaches launch or refresh teacher study groups.

Respect

Coaches can plan study groups that respect adult learners. There is rich literature on literature circles and book clubs for children (e.g., Daniels, 1994; McMahon & Raphael, 1997) and on cooperative learning activities (e.g., Guthrie, et al., 2004; Slavin, 1995). Although literacy coaches might be tempted to employ strategies from that literature so that they model literacy practices that teachers might later incorporate into their own teaching, we think this move is a mistake: a truly successful teacher study group must honor principles of adult learning. Adult learning, and specifically teacher learning, *must* be grounded and connected directly in real life experience; didactic approaches, with a top-down structure and focus, do not engage adults in deep learning experiences. Rather, previous knowledge and expertise, internal motivation, self-direction, and problem-solving (Terehoff, 2002) should be at the heart of the study group plan. Therefore, while many of our recommendations are related to concepts in literature circles and cooperative learning techniques in the literature for children, we translate them for adult learners.

Coaches can plan study groups that respect teachers' identities. It may be that coaches employ study groups as

> **Respecting Adult Learners**
> 1. **Adopt the stance of co-learner rather than teacher.**
> 2. **Connect the study group to a real-life issue in the school.**
> 3. **Use the first study group session to set goals, create a timeline, and set at least one individual responsibility for each participant.**
> 4. **Have a product in mind, one that each participant can use (e.g., a set of lesson plans, a new schedule).**
> 5. **Revisit the goals and timeline at the start of each session, allowing participants to give an update. Amend plans to accommodate new ideas.**

part of an overall strategy for instructional change. When they do that, they must not tread on teachers' self-efficacy and identity as professionals. Rather, a collaborative study group can engage teachers in building, rather than tearing down, their concept of self as professional.

Coaches can plan study groups that respect teachers' time. Unfortunately, teachers encounter many "professional development" experiences that are poorly planned, poorly executed, and poorly matched to their real-world needs. Successful study groups break that mold. They have mutually-established goals, clear and up-front procedures, and expectations of relevance to problems that teachers agree are important.

Coaches can respect teachers as co-learners. Coaches bring specialized knowledge and skills to the study group but so do the other participants. We have found more success when we learn with teachers than when we are directive only from our own expertise. If coaches are conscious and verbal about their own learning in the study group, the climate becomes more collaborative. Other participants get the clear signal that the group is formed not to review what participants already know or should know, but to engage everyone in generating new knowledge.

Choice

With a coach or group of teachers new to study groups as a component of professional support, starting small

may be helpful. It can also help the coach to establish a climate of choice. Adults are more likely to become fully engaged in professional learning when they can exercise choice, including whether they will participate or not. If a coach can juggle more than one group at a time, teachers have additional choices. A relatively low-risk way to start is with a children's or young adult literature book club; coaches can establish relationships with teachers and build knowledge of literature (Boccuzzi-Reichart, 2005; George, 2001; Roberts & Pruitt, 2003). Choosing to join such a study group is relatively low-stakes for teachers–learning more about literature does not necessitate broad instructional changes–and it can be a way for a coach to get a foot in the door for less-comfortable topics. However, researchers have successfully engaged groups of teachers in book clubs focused on very complex and potentially uncomfortable issues–like race, identity, and culture. These clubs have taken adult learning and reflection about literature as their focus, but have successfully influenced instruction in powerful ways (Florio-Ruane & Raphael, 2001).

Richard Stiggins, an expert on assessment, proposes a structure for development of literacy assessment, a real-world need in many schools, that combines a traditional professional development workshop – in our case led by the coach – with a commitment to classroom-based, individual experimentation and reflection, and team meetings. Interestingly, he calls for the team meetings to be entirely

based on choice, formed temporarily for members to reflect on what they are learning in their classrooms (Stiggins, 1999). Such an approach could be facilitated by a coach who arranges time and groupings in response to participant interest.

In many settings, though, the administration has made a whole-school commitment to study groups. Models such as Whole Faculty Study Group (WFSG) (Murphy, 1997) are more and more common. These groups typically link teachers across grades and content areas to build expertise in meeting student needs. They meet for one hour each week to work together. A unique aspect of the WFSG model is that each teacher has a turn in taking on a facilitative role for a study group meeting. In this respect, every member of the faculty is provided the opportunity to showcase a certain area of expertise and develop leadership skills within the larger learning community (Roberts & Pruitt, 2003). In models like WFSG, coaches can be involved in groups as members, rather than as leaders.

Faculties find time for meetings in creative ways. Some schools replace contract time used for faculty meetings with study group time. Some schools have early dismissal one day each week. Others block their specials classes so that all teachers in a particular group have the same planning period. In some schools paraprofessionals rotate around the school, freeing each group for one hour at a time. Such creative and systemic approaches integrate the study group into the regular business of school and provide coaches opportunities for building real momentum (Murphy, 1997).

Although coaches cannot give teachers choice about participating in WFSGs, coaches in those settings can give choice about what teachers read or do. We have found "free-for-all" text selection unproductive. Potentially, teachers choose texts for study that are not associated with the goals of the school or the needs of their learners. However, we have found proposing a small set of choices, each of which would be productive, to be very useful. The coach can do the initial

legwork, finding a set of texts related to the school's goals, reading them, and providing brief descriptions. Then teachers can make a final selection through discussion or voting.

Another form of choice may be especially appropriate for pre-set groupings, such as middle school teams. Many schools are organized so that teams of teachers work together, weekly or biweekly, in study group formats. For these groups, choice in type of study can be powerful. We interpret the term "study group" broadly; the only requirement is that the group work together to learn something. They may work on a variety of projects, each of which is a meaningful chance to build expertise. They may choose to study state or district standards, with the goal of producing a useful pacing guide (Gabriel, 2005). They may choose to study student achievement data, with the goal of designing differentiated instruction (e.g., McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & McDonald, 2003). They may choose to study curriculum materials, with the goal of making informed choices (e.g., Carr, Herman, & Harris, 2005). They may choose to read a professional book with the goal of reflecting on their current practices and considering changes (e.g., Roberts & Pruitt, 2003; Sweeney, 2003). Even though group membership, and perhaps even meeting schedules, are fixed for all, the coach can ensure that the study group allows choice in its focus and in its products.

Incorporating choice

1. **If possible, allow teachers to join study groups voluntarily.**
2. **If the study group is going to read, provide several options of texts; do not participate in the final selection process.**
3. **If the study group is ongoing and mandatory, provide choice in the object of study: curriculum, assessment, or research-based professional books are all appropriate choices.**

Voice

Even if a coach is to respect adult learners and allow them choice, interactions need some structure. The overarching goal of the study group is enhancing the expertise of the individuals in the group, building from their individual efforts with collaborative ones. To accomplish that goal, all learners must have voice during the meetings. Without structure, some participants will not be active, and their ideas will not enrich the discussion. Without structure, the goals of the study group may not be realized in the time allotted. Coaches can provide structure without being didactic; structure can facilitate collaboration and goal-oriented discussion.

One way to provide for voice is to structure time. A one-minute review of the goal of the group and then an agenda for how time will be used in the day's session can provide just enough structure to ensure productive discussion. The coach can ask another group member to be the timekeeper each day in order for the coach not to be seen as a task master.

Another way to provide for voice is to structure tasks. If individuals in the group are responsible in advance for preparing some particular aspect of the groups' work (e.g., summarizing a chapter, answering a question, writing a unit overview), and then allotted time to share on a set agenda, all have a planned voice in the meeting time.

> **Planning for Voice**
> 1. **Structure the time for the meetings.**
> 2. **Assign individual or paired tasks that are then shared.**
> 3. **Refer often and objectively to the goals of the group.**

A choir can include many teacher voices; those voices can create cacophony or harmony. Coaches can plan for both voice and closure in each study group session by planning a summary and next steps. Again, repeating the goal of the group each time, at beginning and end, can be a gentle prod when teachers veer off topic.

Personal Connections

One of the most challenging aspects of teacher study group facilitation comes directly from the characteristics of adult learners–they bring experience to the study group table, and they need the study group to connect with, or build on, that experience. All experiences, however, are not of the same quality, are not equally consistent with the group's goals, and are not equally useful to the group's planned product. Silencing unproductive talk, though, is counterproductive because it saps the strength of professional relationships and fosters a hostile and unproductive learning environment.

We have used several formats to direct personal connections in positive ways. One common response to working with professional texts is making a weak connection to the author's warrant but using most of the study group time to justify the status quo. "This is no different from what we already do" is a comment that a coach might hear from a teacher whose instruction bears no resemblance to the author's ideas. To avoid such uncomfortable situations, we have structured discussions with a protocol: an individual first summarizes an author's idea or concept and then provides one way that it is similar to current knowledge and practice and one way that it is different. This very simple structure provides space for personal connections and for new ideas.

Another way to facilitate positive personal connections is joint construction of guiding questions. Coaches and teachers might ask: What would be most challenging about trying this? What support would we need to try this? Why would it be worthwhile to try this? How could we adapt this idea to make it work best in our classrooms? All of these questions combine attention to new ideas with the realities of the participants' knowledge, skills, and resources.

When student data or work samples are the object of study, personal connections might lead teachers to share biases about students in order to end the discussion. "That child

simply is incapable of high-level thinking." "There is a lot going on at home." "We have to have realistic expectations." Because these very real connections are difficult to counter productively, it may be best to set up norms for ways to discuss data. The norms might include up-front commitments to agree that all students are capable of high achievement, that instruction and school experience are powerful tools, and that discussion should concentrate on things that the team can control – namely, its own actions.

Accepting Reluctance

The best-laid plans for teacher study groups will not be successful for every teacher. We know coaches who assume that a study group has failed when even one of the adult learners is not engaged, an assumption teachers sometimes make when they fail to reach a student. We must consider, however, that when the object of study is linked to substantial changes in teaching, teachers will not embrace tasks equally. Teachers have variable levels of commitment and motivation; they come to study groups with personal sets of strengths and weaknesses. Literacy coaches must accept this fact, just as they ask teachers to accept individual differences in children.

Accepting reluctance is not the same thing as ignoring it (McKenna & Walpole, 2008). We work to draw in every adult learner to the norms and goals of the group. However, coaches may have to differentiate. Personal, private discussions (e.g., "I noticed that you seemed distracted today. Is there something that I can do to make the work of the group more productive for you?") may be a way to communicate to teachers that the coach actually notices

them, cares about them, and wants to make it possible for them to contribute.

One common occurrence in new study groups is that reluctant teachers fail to do their homework. We encourage coaches to anticipate and to plan for this lack of preparation. For example, if some teachers haven't done the reading, a coach might say, "I sense that some of you were too busy to do the reading. We can't move forward without it. Let's use our time right now for you to do the reading, and all of us will meet for a discussion tomorrow." This statement communicates that the group agreements will not be ignored, even if teachers resist. The tasks will simply take more time.

Getting Started

Coaches may have to sell the idea of facilitating study groups as a good use of professional development time. After all, study groups demand teacher time, which could be used in other ways. We think, though, that study groups are an ideal vehicle for meeting the National Staff Development Council's Standards for Staff Development (2001). In terms of context, they organize teachers into communities that are continuing and collaborative. In terms of process,

they provide time and information for applying research to teacher decision making, and they build teacher capacity for meaningful collaboration, both with the coach and with peers. In terms of content, they are a flexible vehicle for considering research-based instructional approaches.

Respecting adult learners, incorporating choice, planning for voice, and thinking through strategies to deal productively with teacher reluctance are considerations for coaches to tackle up front. First, they can work with building administrators to create a time and a place for study. Next, they can decide how groups will be formed and how long they will work together. Then, they can work with each group to select a goal and set a syllabus of tasks to accomplish it. Together, they can establish group norms. And finally, coaches and teachers can reflect on the successes and failures of their group, engaging in continuous improvement.

References

Boccuzzi-Reichart, A. (2005, May). A book club for teachers: Getting colleagues hooked on YA titles is a great way to reach kids. *School Library Journal*. Available: http://www.schoollibraryjournal.com/article/CA529730.html

Carr, J.F., Herman, N., & Harris, D.E. (2005). *Creating dynamic schools through mentoring, coaching, and collaboration*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Daniels, H. (1994). *Literature circles: Voice and choice in student-centered classrooms*. York, ME: Stenhouse.

Florio-Ruane, S., & Raphael, T. E. (2001). Reading lives: Creating and sustaining learning about culture and literacy education in teacher study groups. In C. M. Clark (Ed.), *Talking shop: Authentic conversation and teacher learning* (pp. 64-81). New York: Teachers College Press.

Gabriel, J.G. (2005). *How to thrive as a teacher leader*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

George, M. A. (2001, April). *Teachers learning together: Faculty book clubs as professional development in an urban middle school*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Seattle, WA.

Guthrie, J. T., Wigfield, A., Barbosa, P., Perencevich, K. C., Taboada, A., Davis, M. H., et al. (2004). Increasing reading comprehension and engagement through concept-oriented reading instruction. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 96, 403-423.

McDonald, J.P., Mohr, N., Dichter, A., & McDonald, E.C. (2003). *The power of protocols: An educator's guide to better practice*. New York: Teachers College Press.

McKenna, M. C., & Walpole, S. (2008). *The literacy coaching challenge: Models and methods for grades K-8*. New York: Guilford Press.

McMahon, S. I., & Raphael, T. E. (1997). *The book club connection: Literacy learning and classroom talk*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Murphy, C. (1999, Summer). Finding time for faculties to study together. *Journal of Staff Development*, 20(3), 29-32.

National Staff Development Council. (Revised, 2001). *Standards for staff development*. Oxford, OH: NSDC. Available: http://www.nsdc.org/standards/index.cfm

Roberts, S.M., & Pruitt, E.Z. (2003). *Schools as professional learning communities: Collaborative activities and strategies for professional development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc.

Slavin, R. E. (1995). *Cooperative learning: Theory, research, and practice* (2nd ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Stiggins, R. J. (1999, Summer). Teams. *Journal of Staff Development*, 20(3), 17-21.

Terehoff, I. I. (2002). Elements of adult learning in teacher professional development. *NASSP Bulletin*, 86(632), 65-77.