

SCHOOLS & INNOVATION  
Booklet

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LEWICKI EDUCATION CONSULTING

“ Turning capacity into ability”

**Schools and Innovation**

**How Can Ideas  
Sustain Learning Communities?**

*What Works...and...Works Well*

By

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### “ Turning capacity into ability”

One of the most rewarding aspects of my work with schools is to meet and get to know a diverse and dedicated group of effective teachers – who share a common idea – to bring the best learning conditions to students. After teaching for 17 years, I came to know for myself what worked and what worked well. These last twelve years, I have worked with dozens of innovative schools across the country and 50+ schools in my home state of Wisconsin. I have come to know what works well in creating and sustaining innovative learning communities.

Recently, I had the opportunity to work with 35 teachers from a group of vibrant and innovative schools. We spent several June days together debriefing another vital school year, talking about what worked and looking to the next school year – continuing to collaborate and grow together. These teachers represent exemplary teaching talent and demonstrate their efficacy each and every day at nine remarkable schools – places of powerful, productive, and consequential learning.

Each teacher employs a love for and ability to work with their colleagues in various interdisciplinary scenarios. The most critical element I had witnessed with ALL of them was how they worked so well together. This teaming resulted in powerful student outcomes. Together, whether high school interdisciplinary efforts or middle school place-based efforts – they are powerful and effective teachers.

As we came together that June, I was curious about the teaming efficacy and wanted to know more. I wanted to dig in to their common experiences. What insight could I gather by exploring their aggregated experiences?

I asked them one morning to take a few moments and give time to sharing their insights. Quietly, before our day of collaborative work unfolded, each teacher took time and penned his or her thoughtful responses to the following four questions.

- “What precisely makes teaming with a colleague(s) personally inspiring?”
- “What makes teaming with a colleague(s) effective for instructional delivery?”
- What makes teaming with a colleague(s) powerful for understanding of content?
- “What makes teaming with a colleague(s) challenging?”

And then I asked them this hypothetical closing question.

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- “Imagine you were to create a three-day training for new teachers. What three ‘skill sets’ would you develop to prepare them to team effectively and powerfully?”

Please enjoy their responses as I did when I first read them. The integrity of these teachers shines forth as does the love of learning. Below are their comments compiled from that brief morning reflection. Insightful.

### **What precisely makes teaming with a colleague(s) personally inspiring?**

- Synergy occurs when everything happens effectively. Sum is greater than individual parts.
- Better brainstorming, planning, teaching, more balanced approach. Excitement is contagious.
- Respect, discipline, relationships, informal assessments, flow, transitions, & other aspects of what talents I can learn from my colleagues. The colleague should provide suggestions on what could have been done differently, assist with weaknesses.
- Collaboration is not common in our current high school framework. 10 years as an educator teaching in isolation. Fast pace change with progress.
- To bounce ideas off each other and grow from those ideas.
- Seeing the connections.
- Validation of my ideas and inspirations. Individuals can work to their strengths. Getting additional ideas. Someone to get my back – catching things I might miss.
- Allows one or both or all to learn from each other. Allows a student to be able to learn from the skills and abilities of two or more individuals versus one.
- The sense that my ideas for good instruction are continually reinforced and debated in ways that promote learning.
- The ideas, viewpoints, knowledge, passion, and personality the other person brings to the group.
- So exciting to see the great things going on. Your own learning is so much more in depth because you are exposed to other views. Teaming helps me converge my thinking.
- Ahaa moments. Gosh I didn’t know that. The informal moments.
- It’s engaging and evolving. I learn as much as I teach. It’s comforting to have someone else there.
- Synergy, trust, sharing of stories – makes me a better teacher, usually all teachers come out better & more equipped.
- It creates a culture of “more” opportunity, knowledge application, learning, and perspective.
- I learn so much; it helps me understand my content better & differently.
- Seeing another teacher at his/her best (doing “their thing”). Seeing how the 2 complement each other and often better teaching and learning than you could do alone. Having another person to discuss student success & failure with.

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- The opportunity to really be a life long learner. It is important to continually keep an open mind and learning helps do this. Teaming also allows for bouncing ideas off of one another and continually improving.
- Taking on new rolls –learner, advisor, and resource.
- Working off someone else’s strengths. Becoming an engaged learner as a teacher.
- Ultimately allows us to reach “more” or “other” kids through the teaching lense of a colleague. Students respond to a collegial team approach.
- Learning from one another. Sharing ideas makes ideas multiply.
- Seeing how others approach problems. Finding connections between content areas.
- Working with strengths and weaknesses. Takes the pressure off of having to know everything & please everyone.
- Knowing that there are others striving for similar goals.
- You learn from them, get ideas from them, & can bounce ideas off of them. It simply makes you a better teacher.
- Because a unified front is stronger than going solo.
- It’s a motivator, building grounds to bounce ideas off of people.
- Everyone has different strengths, when we all play into our strengths; it’s a powerful thing.
- Knowing we are all in the same boat – shared challenges, successes, laughter.
- I think it helps when one teacher has a mental block; someone else is there to share some ideas, which brings out many new ideas after. It’s constantly evolving.
- The synergy – more comes than you expect.

### **What makes teaming with a colleague(s) effective for instructional delivery?**

- Multiple experiences, backgrounds, and knowledge presented to class.
- Hold one another accountable; offer advice, more impactful on students.
- Collaborating on book, article, video clip ideas that enhance delivery. Methodology & process to enhance.
- Two minds are always better than one. Student engagement.
- To learn different teaching styles and implement those styles into your own style.
- Using each other’s strengths.
- Demonstration of the collaboration process to students. Expanding range of knowledge and skills.
- Can “feed” off of each other. Different personalities, strengths, knowledge peeling together to accomplish the concepts.
- I believe that colleagues can help reinforce one another -- realizing that different students will be intrigued by different aspects of what is brought to the classroom.
- Students experience your interactions -- there is variety -- it has energy.

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- Each member can concentrate on their strengths and many strong minds are better than one. Can show students how to “disagree” well. We get to learn from each other’s mistakes.
- Showing of knowledge & experiences. Ways of delivery can vary – good for the students.
- Effective planning – enough time to do so (communication). Both teachers are open and flexible – willing to make changes as inspiration hits.
- Playing off of each other’s strengths.
- Different point of view, styles, use of language will capture more students’ minds.
- The back and forth addition of knowledge as it happens (from both/all teachers).
- Extra eyes and ears in each situation.
- Teaming allows for more areas of expertise. Also just as with a sports team, more can be done with a group of educators truly teaming than can be done individually. It also allows for the back and forth relationship of “student” and “teacher”.
- Being able to bring together each other’s strengths. Showing students how to work as a team.
- Working off each other’s strengths (the sum of parts greater concept). It can be efficiently organized through whole concept/multi-tasking.
- For me it is the same us.
- Students don’t learn in separate content areas but collaborative instruction makes interdisciplinary successful. Students see value in how the content works with other content.
- Avoiding isolation. Playing off of other’s strengths. Synthesizing different view points and approaches to make a greater “whole”.
- The students can choose a style that they feel fits them.
- With your students, an “outside” expert is always more “credible”.
- You can share what instructions/strategies worked or didn’t work.
- Because ultimately, three heads are better than one.
- Building of others knowledge base, others know information that I haven’t learned yet, the students can also see the different strengths of different people.
- Students respond well to different kinds of teaching. It’s great for students to be exposed to adults working together.
- More ideas – utilizing ones strengths, playing off each other, more shoulders to carry the load.
- There is someone else there to stop the other while teaching, as they may notice some students aren’t understanding. I think more students are reached.
- Each person brings their strengths & talents so it hits many diverse needs.

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### **What makes teaming with a colleague(s) powerful for understanding of content?**

- When planning the learning experience, the teachers first must understand each other.
- See the whole picture from various angles/perspectives.
- Consistency in the team fosters relationships that are strong & the students can see & benefit from that. Debriefing after lessons to make them better.
- Different perspectives.
- You get a different perspective or twist from others to add to your own knowledge.
- Showing the connection between disciplines.
- Interdisciplinary nature of content. More view points, more strengths, personalities & delivery styles to exploit.
- Can bounce ideas off each other; use each other's expertise and experiences.
- Since my own learning is limited to what I currently know, I can obtain a better-rounded view of an issue by learning from another perspective.
- Variety of delivery – style gives greater depth.
- It's really exciting to, say, pick up a book and think about how it could connect with your area of expertise and the areas of your coworkers – it emphasizes connections where traditional methods seem to emphasize differences.
- Showing the similarities between two content areas – the relationship between. Different teaching styles meet the needs of more students.
- Personal growth & an opportunity for lifelong learning.
- Which content is taught in multi-dimensional style (teaming). Students have greater understanding of depth and complexity or in some cases simplicity.
- Enrichment of seeing ones own content from the context of another content area – it opens so many connections.
- Different vantage points and areas of expertise. Another voice asking questions.
- Teaming allows content to be presented from different perspectives thus giving students multiple angles from which to understand the content.
- Brainstorm new concepts/directions individually wouldn't have thought of.
- Each person can bring a different presentation of understanding to the learners, which makes for stronger, more rich connections.
- Beyond the obvious learning from another expert – much of what understanding is comes from context and interpretation. This gets lost in an 'up down' legacy teaching model. Students feel there is one right answer – which is seldom the case. By working with another, students change their entire paradigm for what is the right answer.
- Real life application of how all the different subjects work together.
- Connections make for more powerful learning.

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- We can check each other to make sure we are communicating well with students.
- The differing viewpoints that come together to give deeper meaning to an activity or concept.
- Everyone has different areas of expertise & we can learn from each other. One person can't be an expert at everything but collectively we can be experts.
- We each bring something to the table and in the context of content each brings 1/3 of the pie.
- Every one has something to share, different ways of presenting the information for better understanding by the students.
- Students respond well to various teaching styles.
- Discussion, brainstorming, again, utilizing one's strengths.
- There are more people to share their views & make discussion of content much easier.
- Diverse background knowledge & skill set.

### **What makes teaming with a colleague(s) challenging?**

- Different beliefs or values. Time!
- Time, personality conflicts, \$, support from district. Breaking the culture, the institutional culture of education.
- Being critical to not hurt feelings, but I would want to know. Personality differences.
- Sharing & knowing others strengths & knowledge. When to let them in.
- Dealing with different moods and personalities can be challenging.
- Blending together not side by side.
- Forces one to see their limitations. Forces growth & change (a good thing but hard to do at times). Time investment to collaborate.
- Different personalities, traits, tendencies, ideas don't always “mesh”.
- Sometimes I have to let my own ideas of what is best rest for the social good of the group.
- Have to be able to communicate. It strengthens trust, reliability, and performance.
- People are not always passionate about the same things. Lack of time for teaming.
- Sharing time and space.
- Different personalities/classroom management – unengaged. One having more “work” than the other – figuring out logistical things such as grading, etc.
- Moving through pseudo-community & chaos.
- Being open to other's methods & style...not to develop it as your own but to respect its value in a multi-dimensional approach.
- When one person views team teaching not as a collaborative but rather I'll do this – you do that.



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- Time to plan & assess. Have to get to know each other/build trust for the success.
- I think truly being open and vulnerable will be the most challenging. Admitting when I don't know something is taught and allowing some one else to take over or help can be difficult when I'm used to working in isolation.
- Timing – some times hard to fit it all in can be offered as continuation pieces?
- Sometimes the expectations of one may be different enough to cause tension.
- Comfort level with ambiguity, preparation styles, and planning.
- You need time to collaborate. You need to be open to other peoples learning & teaching styles. You need to be open to doing things different & being vulnerable.
- Logistics, planning, feeling organized & prepared is difficult.
- Letting go of control can sometimes be hard (easier with practice).
- Time needed. Getting to the nuts and bolts, beyond just talking about it.
- Finding time to collaborate.
- Giving up individual power for the greater good.
- Difference of opinions and or not being able to come to a quick decisive decision.
- Different ideas, working at different paces, schedules.
- Everyone has their own ideas (this is good and bad). Finding time.
- We don't always see eye to eye & have to make compromises. However, that's life!
- Time constraints & different visions can create challenges.

**Imagine you were to create a three-day training for new teachers. What three “skill sets” would you develop to prepare them to team effectively and powerfully?**

- a. Ability to:
  - Collaborate & communicate
  - Listen & brainstorm...”ideate”
  - Think outside the box
  - Listen effectively
  - Communicate
  - Listen
  - Work together
  - Create open ended lessons centered on powerful concepts
  - Communicate
  - Be a co-learner and facilitator instead of a subject area expert
  - Talk/Share ideas and knowledge
  - Be open minded/flexible
  - Communicate with all stockholders
  - Understand own style & strength within it
  - Listen proactively & respond
  - Be flexible
  - Build relationships with colleagues and students

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- Balance multiple tasks
- Create a workflow that is efficient & effective
- Generalize
- Share
- Communicate with others
- Be flexible
- Change
- Be open minded and listen
- Communication
- Share/participate in the discussion
- Share resources
- Accept others ideas (compromise)
- Be open minded
- Listen actively (take that info to use in a variety of ways)
- b. Ability to:
  - Open themselves up
  - Research & design
  - Check your “ego” at the door
  - Work efficiently
  - Adapt
  - Trust others
  - Use others skills effectively
  - Utilize technology in ways that support students learning & goals
  - Synthesize material
  - Form relationships with students and co-faculty
  - Step back and take a look
  - Let go of being “the expert” – knowing it all
  - Process for collaboration (be able to sit at a table & combine ideas)
  - Have a “tool box” of additional methods
  - Design interdisciplinary projects – differentiated by standards or skills (bloom’s)
  - Be open to new ideas & modes
  - Be vulnerable to new teaching and learning environments
  - Think outside traditional classroom training – forward planning
  - Be a flexible partner
  - Seek generative opportunities
  - Recognize the value in different teaching styles
  - Make connections to other content areas
  - Listen
  - Value student input
  - Accept the fact you are not an expert at everything
  - Reflect
  - Handle when their ideas are shot down
  - Give and take
  - Listen

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- Be open to suggestion
- Articulate ideas clearly
  
- c. Ability to:
  - Debrief each lesson/unit
  - Present with technology, use it.
  - Never stop researching possibilities, stay the course, find resolution not excuses
  - Reflect properly
  - Let go
  - Be flexible, resourceful, communicate effectively
  - Plant but also adapt to change
  - See connections between subject areas and provide relevancy
  - Take risks! As well as trust!
  - Be engaged when team teaching – be in the moment – paying attention to what is going on in the seminar – not be doing others things
  - Brainstorm out of the traditional box
  - Understanding professional development as a tool to keep knowledgeable in educational trends and student development.
  - Develop ideas of content, flow, but how to be reactive/flexible to change design based on ideas generated in seminar.
  - See connections between content areas, and their content areas and life.
  - Be a true life long learner
  - Reflect
  - Follow through on your work
  - Organize and communicate information
  - Be open
  - Step outside of the box & to let go of the “old” way of doing things.
  - Continue with what works – change if needed
  - Listen
  - Be willing to share ideas, practices and things that work for you.
  - Destroy the “box”, dare to be creative
  - To think outside the box
  - Contribute
  - Laugh
  - Inspire others
  - Problem solve

After reading through these wonderful words and thoughts, I realized these teachers had given me a gift from their collective experience that was truly rare – language – powerful language that resonated from each of them. Do you know what the top three words are in this powerful language that you have just read? I asked myself that question and was surprised by two of them. I figured that students

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would be prominent in their reflections as each teacher is a master at developing a classroom culture where students thrive. And students were there – in fact, the number three most frequent word in all the accumulated responses. What was the number two and number one most frequent word? This is where my surprise came into play. The second most frequent word was “can” and the most frequent word of all was “idea”.

Can? Of course, these teachers exemplified the ‘can do’ spirit of faculty who get things done. From the Old English – *cunnan* – **can** means “know, have power to, be able”.

Idea was the most frequent. And when I looked up its origin I was struck by something that I rarely ever come across...Idea is the same root in Latin as it is in Greek. Moreover, it is a powerful word with many ‘word allies’ that come to play in powerful learning experiences; like the following:

*Idea = thought, inspiration, concept, preoccupation, figment, generalization, plan, program, cognitive, cogitation, mind, intent, purpose, design, estimate, figuring, reckoning, guessing, calculation, opinion, view, persuasion, and sentiment to name just a few.*

Finally, doing this research on the word idea, I came across this quote from a letter Thomas Jefferson wrote on August 13<sup>th</sup>, 1813 to Isaac McPherson where he expressed what an idea can do. Jefferson wrote,

*“...it is the action of the thinking power called an idea, which an individual may exclusively possess as long as he keeps it to himself; but the moment it is divulged, it forces itself into the possession of every one, and the receiver cannot dispossess himself of it. Its peculiar character, too, is that no one possesses the less, because every other possesses the whole of it. He who receives an idea from me, receives instruction himself without lessening mine; as he who lights his taper at mine, receives light without darkening me. That ideas should freely spread from one to another over the globe, for the moral and mutual instruction of man, and improvement of his condition, seems to have been peculiarly and benevolently designed by nature, when she made them, like fire, expansible over all space, without lessening their density in any point, and like the air in which we breathe, move, and have our physical being, incapable of confinement or exclusive appropriation. Inventions then cannot, in nature, be a subject of property.”<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> [http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/a1\\_8\\_8s12.html](http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/a1_8_8s12.html)