Designing Learning Labs

Learning Labs are organized opportunities for teachers to engage in the work of teaching together. Learning Labs are designed to offer professional development that is close to practice and fosters collaborative communities in which educators continue to learn from one another and develop shared practices.

Goals of Learning Labs

• To develop ways of working together that support ongoing learning of our craft
• To create a collaborative disposition of innovation, risk-taking, and informing decisions based on effectiveness with students
• To hone our practice by drawing on the expertise of multiple educators sharing a teaching/learning experience
• To develop a shared understanding of high quality teaching that includes eliciting and responding to students’ ideas

Getting Started With Learning Labs

Setting Purpose:
Consider what you hope to achieve by leading learning labs. What do you hope to learn about, work on, and get better at? Your goals for professional collaboration, teacher learning, and student learning will drive your decisions about what to work on and how to structure your time together. Below are some examples of goals you could work toward through learning labs:

• Develop ways of using discussion to make sure all students are engaged with ideas and sense-making.
• Develop ways to support English Language Learners to engage in rich discourse during classroom discussions.
• Understand the Cognitively Guided Instruction trajectory, how to assess and interpret students’ talk and thinking in number and operation, and develop more strategies to advance students’ fluency.
• Understand and develop robust and effective approaches to routine instructional activities that show up in the curriculum.
Logistics:

- **Determine Structure and Participants:** Will you work with two groups of teachers during the day and have the substitutes rotate from one classroom to a second at lunchtime? Or is this just one group for the whole day? Will you go into two classrooms where you try out something, revise and enter the same or similar grade-level? Who else might you involve in the labs: teacher candidates, specialists, paraeducators?
- **Arrange Substitutes:** How many substitute teachers do you need? For which days? Can you creatively use people in the building to reduce the amount of subs needed?

Introducing Labs:

Communicating with everyone the intentions of this work is very important. Consider carefully how you will convey that learning labs are a space to collaboratively investigate and experiment with teaching and learning. If you want to create a culture of trying new things and making practice public, how will you create a safe environment in which teachers can take that risk?

Participation in Labs

In order to make learning labs successful and productive spaces for learning, it may be helpful to distinguish between the roles of participants and guests.

**Lab participants should:**

- Understand that the purpose of labs is to support participants’ learning through examining students’ thinking while working on instructional practices working with colleagues.
- Attend and participate in *all* parts of the lab (planning, enactment, and debriefs) during a particular lab day
- Offer in-the-moment support during the classroom visit through the use of teacher time outs
- Agree to follow the lab norms established by the lab team

**Visitors should:**

- Understand that the purpose of labs, ultimately, is to support teachers’ learning. This is accomplished by selecting tasks/strategies specifically designed for learning labs, which allow teachers insights into students’ thinking. The teachers are intentionally working on particular instructional practices together. The purpose is not to have a polished lesson.
- Observe planning, enactments, and debriefs with generosity of spirit, appreciating that teachers are taking risks by trying new instructional practices.
- Observe the unique opportunities to learn during classroom visits and the ways that the lab participants support each other during teacher time outs
- When invited, convey to lab participants their observations
Designing a Learning Lab

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<th>Identifying Goals for the Lab</th>
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**Selecting What to Work On**
What goals do you have for teacher learning and collaboration? These goals should help inform the content and design of your learning lab. You may also consider student learning needs, upcoming units of study, and what teachers want to work on.

With these ideas in mind, decide what you want to learn about or try. For example, you might choose a new instructional activity to learn about and try, you may want to use a familiar activity to dig deeper into a particular content idea, or you might focus on talk moves to focus on, other initiatives such as culturally responsive teaching or strategies for working with ELLs.

**Preparing For the Lab**
Before the learning lab, leaders may want to try out the Instructional Activity a few times in classrooms with children in order to understand the potential of the IA, better anticipate student thinking, and highlight important things to plan for during the collaborative planning time.

**Positioning Yourself as a Learner**
Throughout the learning lab and your other interactions with teachers, consider how you will position yourself and others. We all have important contributions to make and we also have a lot to learn.

You can create an environment of experimentation and collaboration by participating fully alongside teachers, taking risks publicly (leading classroom visits, offering up in-progress ideas), inviting teachers to share their ideas, and communicating that labs are a place to try things out together, not to be perfect.
**Principals**

A key role as an instructional leader is to understand what teachers are working on to develop in their own practice so you can provide feedback around their progress in developing these practices. Remember that teachers need to feel that it is safe to take risks and try new practices (“You can't look good and get better at the same time”). You want to gently press teachers to try new instructional practices and strategies, but also provide them with the support needed to do so.
In order to engage in practice together, your team will need to develop some shared ideas about what it is you will try with students, how students and teachers participate in the activity, and what we hope to learn from trying the activity with students.

Begin by introducing participants to the Instructional Activity (IA), talk moves, and/or content topic that you will be focusing on in this lab. Below are some possible ways you might introduce the activity.

- **Engaging teachers in the instructional activity as learners**: Acting as teacher, the facilitator can lead the participants in actually doing the activity. You might select a task that is appropriate for students or a slightly more challenging task.

- **Read about the instructional activity**: If there are brief readings available that describe the instructional activity, talk moves, or content you will be focusing on, you might have participants read through and discuss what they notice.

- **Showing a video of the instructional activity**: Videos of many instructional activities can be found at TeachingChannel.com and TEDD.org.

- **Model the instructional activity with students**: Visit a classroom and engage students in the activity for participants to observe.

As you introduce participants to the instructional activity, encourage them to notice...

- What content ideas can students learn by engaging in the activity?
- What opportunities there are to listen to student thinking?
- What are you curious about? What can we learn from students when we try this out?
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<td>After establishing a common vision of the instructional activity, you can begin planning to try it out in a classroom with children.</td>
<td>Have we visited these classrooms before? How will we introduce the classroom visits to students?</td>
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**Selecting the particular task or lesson:**

It is helpful to prepare in advance a rough plan for the lesson, or to provide a few task options for participants to choose from. This focuses the planning time by narrowing the range of decisions that must be made. If you have selected the task in advance, you might explain your thinking behind it and invite participants to share what they notice. If you are collaboratively selecting a task, use this time to discuss the possible benefits and drawbacks of each task and anticipate student thinking.

**Collaboratively planning the lesson:**

Plan the details of the lesson using a common planning protocol or template. Attend to details like:

- What is the overall flow of the lesson?
- What do we think students will say or do?
- Where are the important or “tricky” moments in this lesson? How might we respond in these moments?
- When will we ask students to turn and talk?
- What will we be listening for?
- If you will go into more than one class, are there different variations on the same activity that you can try? What can you learn by trying it the same way twice in two different ways?

Revisit your goals for teacher learning: how will we work on those goals during the planning and rehearsal?

If Teacher Time Out is new to the team, how will you introduce it?

What can we do to position ourselves as learners during this visit? What can we say to support a culture of risk taking?
**Determine who will lead or co-lead the lesson:**
Emphasize that the classroom visit lesson is not a model lesson. It is meant to be collaborative and experimental in nature. Carefully consider how you might include participants in leading the classroom visit lessons. Consider…

- Modeling vulnerability: If labs are new to this team, it can be helpful for the coach or principal to lead the first lesson, being mindful to invite participants into the decision-making through Teacher Time Out. This can help participants see that the lesson is truly shared and that perfection is not the goal. Positioning yourself as a learner is critical to creating a school-wide professional learning community.

- Status: Everyone has important contributions to this work. Help communicate this by making sure that, over time, all participants are encouraged and have the opportunity to lead the lesson.

- If you are going into classrooms twice, it's a nice opportunity to involve more people in taking the lead. Participants can also share the responsibility by leading pieces of the lesson or partnering.

**Articulate how the lesson will be introduced:**
If the Instructional Activity is new to students, plan to explain what will happen and how they should participate. Also, if labs are new to your school, you may want to plan to explain the classroom visit and introduce Teacher Time Outs to students. Help them know that you are excited to learn from them.

**Reviewing or “rehearsing” the lesson:**
If time allows, practice the lesson together. The lead teachers can either act it out with other participants acting as students or talk through the plans. Pay attention to when you will ask students to talk about particular ideas and how you will represent their thinking. Remind the group what they are aiming to learn from the classroom visits.
Preparing for in-the-moment collaboration:
Remind teachers and principals about their active role—we are teaching the lesson together. Classroom visits are an opportunity to engage in collaborative decision-making and experimentation.

Before going into the classroom together, establish some norms for how everyone will participate. Encourage participants to pay close attention to the students, even sitting down right amongst them, and to actively participate in the decision-making through Teacher Time Outs. Consider what kind of Teacher Time Outs may be appropriate and how you will make sure students experience them positively. Some teams have found it useful to explicitly plan a particular spot in the lesson to take a Teacher Time Out and check in with one another.

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Note: If possible, plan to enact the lesson in two different classrooms. This allows the group to notice what happens when an element of the lesson is changed and how it affects students. It enhances your ability to hone the craft of teaching.

**Teaching the Lesson: Classroom Visit #1**
Participants come in and sit amongst the students so that they can listen to student thinking, students questions, or call a Time Out to talk through pedagogical decisions with other teachers.

Introduce the lesson and the teachers to the students. “You are our teachers today! We are really curious about how you think and want to learn from you today.” Explain to the students that teachers are learners too and that you will be taking Teacher Time Outs to talk with one another about their ideas and what the teachers might want to try next.
Call a time-out early in the lesson to invite teachers and principal to share their ideas or questions. “Does anyone have something they are thinking about right now that they want to share or try out?”

After the lesson, collect any student work for your follow-up discussion and thank the students for their participation and great thinking today.

**Revise before 2nd classroom visit**

Between classroom visits, discuss your insights about what happened for students’ thinking and learning.

- What did you learn about students’ ideas about the content?
- Did the lesson play out as you predicted? If not, why not?
- What would you like to try differently during the next classroom visit?

**Classroom Visit #2:**

Go into the second classroom and repeat the classroom experience with revisions.

**Analyze**

**Reflect on the classroom visits:**

- What did you learn about students’ thinking?
- What did you learn about teaching? (e.g., what talk moves seemed to support students’ discourse)
- What did you learn about the nature of literacy or mathematics? (e.g., these kids seemed to relate their experiences with

Use student work or artifacts from the classroom visits to support your discussion. Listen carefully to what teachers are noticing and bringing into this conversation and surface additional ideas that you want them to notice.
**Committing to trying the activity:**

If we want this work to have impact on teaching and learning, it has to live on beyond learning lab days. One way we can encourage continued, shared learning is by asking participants to commit to trying the activity in their own class and creating space for people to continue discussing what they learn.

What will you try out in your own classroom based on this experience? Try to create specific plans for what each participant will try, when they will try it, and when you will discuss what happened.

If possible, plan for moments to collaborate around practice in the future. The coach and principal might make arrangements to come try the activity in a teacher’s classroom or teachers may find time to be in one another’s classrooms.

**Exit tickets:**

Use an Exit ticket to see what individual teachers are walking away thinking about. You might pose a very open question for them to reflect on, or ask a specific question based on your vision or curiosity about their thinking.

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<th>Crafting exit tickets: What do we want to understand about what individual teachers’ learned about today?</th>
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<td>How will we follow up with teachers to see if they have tried the new practices?</td>
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<td>• Classroom visits—When will the coach visit? When will the principal visit?</td>
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<td>• Attend the next PLC meeting where new insights should be taken up and discussed to carry the lab work into regular practice.</td>
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### Connecting Learning Labs to Daily Planning, Instructional Practice, and Data Use

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<th>Following a Lab, it is quite useful to return to ideas, talk with teachers about what they have tried in their classrooms with their kids, and what they are learning and struggling with. PLCs can offer a good space for developing their practice.</th>
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<td>Coaches and Principals, this is where you can check in with teachers about what they have tried in their own classrooms and decide if there are new commitments the group wants to make.</td>
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### Key resources:

**Teacher Education by Design:** [www.TEDD.org](http://www.TEDD.org)

Teacher Education by Design (TEDD) is a website resource created by the College of Education designed to support the work of teacher educators and professional development facilitators. This website has resources for learning about instructional activities, across content areas, organized around a learning cycle. In the content areas section you will find sample facilitator plans, videos, planning protocols, and other tools to help you design learning labs.

**Teaching Channel:** [www.TeachingChannel.org](http://www.TeachingChannel.org)

The Teaching Channel is a great resource for videos of classroom instruction. Search for videos at Lakeridge Elementary to see videos of the elementary math instructional activities being enacted at a local school.