Common Space, Common Time, Common Work

Melody J. Shank

A Maine high school supports its new teachers by providing an environment that maximizes collaborative problem solving.

Curt's dilemma is one that any new teacher could have. The end of the school year is approaching, and his 10th grade integrated math students are not doing their homework. Maybe he should have set higher expectations, but it seems a little late now. He looks around the office area for his grade-level team members, hoping they can help him. Seeing them at their desks in the shared office space, he requests a team meeting during their morning planning time. Instead of waiting, Curt's team members—a master humanities and social studies teacher, a veteran science teacher, a first-year humanities and English teacher, and a special education teacher—immediately stop what they are doing and congregate in a jagged circle, some sitting and some standing as they focus on Curt.

Curt, a second-year teacher who entered the field with no formal teacher education background, quickly learns that his teammates are also noticing their own students' lack of effort. What Curt is experiencing may not relate to his instruction; it may be a student response to the impending close of the school year. After 15 minutes of collaborative brainstorming and problem solving in which all of the team members, including the novices, actively participate, the teachers outline an action plan for the following week: Assemble the students, state the problem, propose and elicit possible solutions, and provide an incentive for success.

During this session, Curt's colleagues validate his concern and provide him with a gauge that helps him situate his expectations of his students in a larger context. He discovers that he can rely on his colleagues to support him in exploring teaching dilemmas, expanding his repertoire of possible solutions, and implementing the most appropriate plan. The predicament that Curt thought was his individual problem became a shared one, to consider and solve collectively.

Curt shared this story with me as part of a study that I recently conducted at Poland Regional High School, a five-year-old regional public school in rural Maine. For more than a year, I observed and interviewed first- and second-year teachers and school leaders to understand how
the school's innovative teacher induction process works in this highly collaborative teaching culture.

**Learning Every Day**

The induction of new teachers is commonly viewed as a specially designed program of support and learning. Schools and school districts establish mentoring programs, orientation meetings, support groups, and workshops to address the needs of teachers during their first few years (Serpell, 2000; Zeichner, 1979). These programs are intended to support new teachers as they make the transition into full-time teaching.

Curt's school supports new teachers through an orientation at the beginning of the year, short- or long-term mentoring, and a new teachers group. But the most valued means of support and learning cited by the new teachers at Poland Regional are the collegial interactions that common workspace, common planning time, and common tasks make possible. These everyday structures enable new and veteran teachers to converse about curricular and pedagogical decisions, student learning, administrative logistics, and professional learning through an embedded approach to professional development. New teachers in the school are surrounded by colleagues who help them with the questions that arise in their everyday teaching.

Poland Regional High School designed the three organizational structures—common space, common time, and common work—to make professional development of both new and experienced teachers a natural part of teachers' work. These structures are also grounded in the school's founding beliefs. The school's belief statement describes teacher learning as a lifelong, active pursuit, involving problem solving and the performance of authentic tasks. Teachers are viewed as professionals who deserve support from the community and the administration for their learning and growth. They are expected to collaborate with colleagues, students, parents, and community members.

The principal, one of the designers of the school, has given a great deal of thought to situating teacher professional development squarely in everyday interactions:

My experience says that teachers learn most from conversations with other teachers. The greatest staff development happens in those everyday conversations about where they have to go next. [In designing the school] we wanted to create that opportunity as often as possible.

Consequently, the school structured physical workspaces, planning time, and curricular and teaching arrangements to enable teachers to easily collaborate. Common space, common time, and common work frame the support and learning that new teachers experience in the company of their colleagues.

**Common Space**

Teachers of core academic subjects at Poland Regional High School don't “own” classrooms—they share them with other teachers, bringing their supplies and books with them to class from
their common office spaces. This physical organization opens learning spaces for common use and reduces teachers’ inclination to view classrooms and offices as their private space. As one new teacher noted while looking back on her first year of teaching at Poland Regional, this arrangement makes seeking out help easier:

It wasn't like I had my own classroom and had to knock on someone else's door and say, “Can you look at this?” or “What do you think of this?” I just leaned over [and asked for help].

“Leaning over” to ask for help occurs easily in the workspace that most teachers share with their colleagues at Poland Regional. Although teachers of physical education, fine arts, and industrial technology, as well as some special education teachers, tend to spend most of their time in their specialized classrooms, teachers of core academic subjects and collaborating special educators share their workspace with 10–12 colleagues, each of whom has a low-walled cubicle. In the morning and during common planning time, the spaces are alive with activity and conversation.

Poland's administrators and teachers carefully consider who will share office spaces. Coteaching teams, cross-curricular grade-level teams, and content-area teachers are clustered together. Consequently, teachers who teach students in the same grade level can easily consult one another as issues arise. Teachers who teach the same courses can sit together as they plan units and lessons. Veteran teachers can help novice teachers.

These common workspaces are invaluable in helping new teachers make sense of teaching. As a new social studies teacher remarked, the space enables him to listen in on veteran teachers' spontaneous conversations about teaching dilemmas and to learn from their deliberations and experiences. This is important because sometimes, he said, new teachers don't know what questions to ask:

[You may be] struggling with something that doesn't directly affect you, but you think about it and say, “Wow, that's something I may have a problem with down the line.” To be able to think about that and then immediately jump into the conversation or ask those colleagues if you can talk to them later cannot be scripted or predicted.

The common office space also encourages colleagues to search out answers to all kinds of questions. As one new mathematics teacher remarked,

Some days, I would just go in there and say, “OK, if a student does da-da-da, what would you do?” And I wait for feedback from everybody.

In the office, teachers regularly pop their heads over their cubicle walls to offer suggestions or elaborate on an idea overheard. One new teacher described how an idea that he suggested—about differentiating questions for students—spread through his workspace, with colleagues adapting and building on it.

The office space provides a protected yet public place where teachers can express frustrations about teaching, share successes and challenges, learn new ideas, and envision possibilities.
Sharing these spaces engages new teachers in learning the norms and practices of the school and of their profession through social participation (Wenger, 1998).

**Common Time**

Although common workspace is an important organizational structure, it would be unproductive if it were not combined with common planning time. In addition to the 15 professional development days built into the school calendar and the weekly faculty meetings, teachers at Poland Regional High School are allotted more than 13 hours each week for planning.

Teachers who team teach or work on a team with a common group of students use this time flexibly for both individual and team planning. Common planning time enables team teachers to plan their curriculum together, jointly assess student work, interact with colleagues, and consult with parents and students in a group setting. Such time also allows for spontaneous conversations and collaborative problem solving. The common space and time surround the new teachers with what one new teacher calls the “flow of collaborative energy.”

**Common Work**

Teachers can have common workspace and common planning time yet still work alone. But this is not the case at Poland Regional High School, where teachers share a great part of their work. During their common planning time, teachers focus on the authentic task of “deciding what they will do next,” as the school principal put it, on several different levels. Many structural features of the school curriculum create common tasks for teachers that require collaboration.

**Standards-Based Assessment**

Grading at Poland Regional is standards-based. Students receive credit for courses by demonstrating achievement at one of three levels: competent, advanced, or distinguished. This assessment structure requires that instructors of common classes or grade levels work together to clarify the curricular standards and quality requirements. In addition, Maine's Local Assessment System—which requires school districts to develop a set of common assessments to measure achievement of state standards—necessitates collaboration among teachers to create or select these assessments and evaluate student work.

**Advisory Groups**

Each teacher advises a group of 10–12 students throughout those students’ high school years. At each grade level, the students in the advisory groups engage in a specific task. Freshmen design their personal growth plan. Sophomores prepare their core portfolio, which includes documentation of their achievement of broad cross-disciplinary learning goals. Juniors focus on career planning and engage in job shadowing and community service. Seniors choose an inquiry focus and present their resulting projects in a culminating exhibition. The advisors at each grade level meet monthly to coordinate responsibilities, curricular objectives, and projects.
Grade-Level Teams

Freshmen and sophomores are organized into teams of 60–80 students. Each team is supervised by five teachers—a science teacher, a mathematics teacher, a social studies teacher, an English teacher, and a special education teacher—who work together to meet the learning needs of their assigned students. Their common focus is group and individual success.

For new 9th or 10th grade team teachers, the team provides needed support in classroom management, organization, and assessment practices as well as in getting to know the students. As one new teacher noted,

My team members had actually figured many of these issues out, so they said, “Here's what we do.” That was super helpful.

Integrated Curriculum

The social studies and English curriculums at Poland Regional are integrated for grades 9–11. Pairs of teachers collaborate to design curriculum and assessments and to plan pedagogical approaches for groups of 40 students. For the new teachers in these coteaching arrangements, working with colleagues on common tasks provides an optimal learning experience. One new teacher described his coteaching relationship as “a wonderful opportunity to experiment, to toss ideas around, to talk on a daily basis about pedagogy and students.” For him, the relationship is a place of opportunity, challenge, and discovery. He is continually encouraged to think about his strengths and weaknesses as a teacher and to learn from the strengths of his coteaching partner.

In other curricular areas, teachers collaborate closely on courses that they teach in common. For example, in planning and teaching the 9th and 10th grade integrated science curriculum, teachers work together to create assessments, units of study, and learning activities. As one new science teacher noted about his work with his fellow science teacher,

Connie and I, every day, are doing exactly the same thing in class. We spend pretty much every minute together. We sit at the computer together [to create assessments] and talk. [We] collaborate on everything.

Attending to the Everyday

In Poland Regional High School's highly collaborative culture, learning to teach requires new teachers to have the skills and the desire to work closely with their colleagues. The high school specifically looks for these qualities in candidates during its hiring process. Learning to teach in this kind of collaborative environment requires that teachers accept the organizational demands of sharing rooms and carting materials back and forth between office and classroom and that they are respectful of other teachers' needs for quiet time and individual space within common work areas. The school also recognizes that teachers need to develop their own identities and voices as strong, independent practitioners even as they hone their collaborative skills.
In their study of high schools, McLaughlin and Talbert (2001) highlight the importance of context in student learning. Similarly, the context in which teaching takes place has a powerful influence on the well-being and learning of new teachers (Williams, 2003; Williams, Prestage, & Bedward, 2001). New teachers are more likely to successfully negotiate the difficult transition into teaching when they have the ability to garner immediate support and assistance.

Paying careful attention to the everyday structures of space, time, and work can have a tremendous influence on new teachers' learning and on their feelings of well-being. Poland Regional High School challenges us to think of teacher induction not only as a set of separate interventions but also as a set of structural conditions that provide teachers with ample time and collaborative workspace to make joint decisions about their next teaching steps.

References


Author's note: The names of all individuals are pseudonyms.

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