

## **Create a Learning Community**

by Barbara Bray

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As teachers become more proficient technology users, they will want to become part of a larger learning community. Technology opens doors to new ways of teaching and learning (ISTE, 2000). To provide an environment where teachers take risks to try new strategies, the school needs to assess how they provide professional development opportunities for their staff and determine that if what they are presently doing is effective. Student learning outcomes, the curriculum, and identified teachers' needs should drive the focus of these opportunities. This program involves the development of a learning community supported by the administration that goes beyond the school borders, the school day, and typical staff development activities. As part of the staff development listserv I moderate, results of an ongoing poll on the type of learning opportunities needed to create a successful program showed that collaborative time was listed the number one priority. A report from the U.S. Department of Education in September 2000, indicated that 80% considered the lack of time was a major barrier to using technology. Time is a major concern in building a learning community, however just providing time will not create a learning community. An effective professional development program includes a variety of opportunities for teachers to participate in that includes not only time for collaboration but mentoring, coaching, and an environment conducive to change.

### **What is a learning community?**

When you think of learning, you think of the school, the curriculum, and what and how the students are learning. Learning takes place in the classroom, on field trips, at home, and hopefully, everywhere a student is where they can read, discuss, share, learn and take an active role in the process. It does not always mean students are ready and willing to learn, but the possibilities can be there for any student to reach their full potential. The philosophy of a community such as this is everyone is a teacher and learner. Everyone has an expertise ready to share with others. The community is based on inquiry and reflection. What am I doing that will help reach the learning outcomes for the students? What can I learn so I can better support the student program? The community also becomes more of a family, a place where the administrator supports and champions the program, and where the school community rallies behind what needs to be done to reach the goals.

### **Adults and Change**

Adults find that change is a highly personal experience. Students are ready to try almost anything. Just put a student in front of a computer and let them go! It is important not to judge a person's stage of response or reaction to change. (Bray) Change is a process and may take three to five years or more depending on the situation at that school. Even the most technology-oriented teachers may need time to reflect upon how technology will work with their curriculum. Adult learning strategies have been researched and studied over the years and still apply today (Smith, 1982).

Adults learn throughout their lives with some learning a little faster than others.

Adults bring their life experiences to each situation.

Adults learn best when staff development is built upon past experiences and when learning is relevant to their situation.

Adults need time to reflect upon how to apply their new knowledge and skills and review what worked and did not work.

Adults learn best in a non-threatening environment of reciprocal trust and freedom to experiment, fail, and try again.

### **Examples of Learning Communities**

Nancy Haas (NHAAS@mail.capousd.k12.ca.us), Technology Resource Specialist of Capistrano Unified School District (<http://education.capousd.k12.ca.us/nhaas/>) is an active contributor to the listserv and shared information on being a Community of Practice in response to the results of the poll that I mentioned above: "in J.S. Brown's book on the Social Life of Information, when one considers his notion that learning is not just collecting facts, but actually applying within the context of one's own knowledge management, the user moves from the novice to the master. When you consider what Etienne Wenger, Situated Learning, says about Community of Practice and learning, we realize just how important it is for the individual to manage their own learning and to be part of a Community of Practice."

Jan Wee (weejan@mail.holmen.k12.wi.us) is a full-time instructional technologist at the Holmen District in Wisconsin with an on-going staff development program with multiple levels and opportunities for technology literacy and integration where teachers can manage their own learning. The program is competency-based and rewards participants for completing the assessments beginning with learning how to use applications (Level I) and to integrating technology in the classroom (Level II and III). Teachers receive a stipend if the required assessments are successfully completed. Stipends are per technology application area for each level and a participant can earn as much as \$455.00 for completing seven areas (four are required and they can pick three optional areas).

Check out this program at:

[http://www.holmen.k12.wi.us/IS/Stipend/technology\\_stipend\\_program.htm](http://www.holmen.k12.wi.us/IS/Stipend/technology_stipend_program.htm)

In the last CUE newsletter (Nov/Dec 2000), Joni Turville (turville@oanet.com) and Barb Scott (scottb@spschools.org) in Alberta, Canada shared how the staff created their own program based on their interests and needs. Both Joni and Barb are given release time to work with either the teacher or the class in the classroom. Joni added to a discussion on job-embedded staff development: "It became much more of an "us" thing, because teachers who felt more confident worked to develop projects with others (and taught the technology basics in the context they were needed). "The teachers began most of their work with a mentor in a networked lab, and now the school also has a networked pod of computers in the library as well as 1-2 networked computers in every classroom (and now they know what to do with them!). It's a model that has been very successful and has resulted in 100% of the staff being able to integrate technology into their curricula (in differing degrees still, of course)."

**To Be Continued...**

Developing a learning community of practice at your school with all stakeholders is the first step to achieving your student learning outcomes either by providing support on-site, on-line, or through opportunities for individual learning. Learning, wherever and whenever it happens, is a process that technology users and staff developers find ongoing and never-ending. Just when you learn one thing you find something else that works better. Being part of an online community with colleagues in similar situations as you provides opportunities to reflect, share, and learn. Share any successes, projects, ideas, or reflections with others for future CUE columns or articles either through the listserv (techstaffdevelop-subscribe@egroups.com) or email me (bbray@compstrategies.com).

**Resources:**

Bray, B. Job-Embedded Staff Development. Today's School: Shared Leadership in Education. Fall 2000. p.40-43.

International Society of Technology in Education. National Education Standards for Students and Teachers (NETS). Available online. September 2000. <http://www.iste.org>.

Smith, R. Learning How to Learn: Applied Theory for Adults. Follett Publishing. 1982.

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