

FIELDWORK

NOTES FROM EXPEDITIONARY LEARNING CLASSROOMS

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Logical Connections: A COHERENT APPROACH TO PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

BY LORRI EDWARDS

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Coherence

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*I*t started out as a simple request. Lyle Krislock, principal at Summit School in Spokane, Washington, was asked to report to the school board on how Expeditionary Learning delivers professional development and why it is working so well at Summit.

It is working well for Summit, a K-8 school in its second year with Expeditionary Learning. Lyle and I both know that. The staff displays a collaborative spirit, thoughtfully embraces and masters new practices, and a quick walk-through shows the schoolwide impact of their work on classroom culture and instructional practices. But the question got under my skin. Why is it working so well?

I reread a short description of how Expeditionary Learning supports network schools:

“Expeditionary Learning fosters change in the culture, structures and teaching/assessment practices of its partner schools. Over a multiyear period, school faculties and administrators are offered a coherent, demanding, and highly regarded program of professional development to implement the model and to realize significant improvement in student learning ...”

There was something intriguing in that brief



During a study on African animals at Minturn Middle School in Minturn, Colorado, sixth graders Carmen Castillo and Mary Rosze created these masks blending the physical characteristics of two animals (see story about Minturn's first year on page 8).

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grow out of the experience and
philosophy of Outward Bound.®

Logical Connections, continued from page 1

description. The word that stood out for me was *coherent*. I actually went online and looked up its meaning.

Cohere (vb):

1. To have internal elements or parts logically connected so that aesthetic consistency results.
2. To stick or hold together in a mass that resists separation.

The language of coherence now provided a new framework for me to think about the Summit School experience and reflect on its success.

A COHERENT STRATEGY

Summit School has a coherent strategy. Their strategy is to align their school improvement plan, Expeditionary Learning implementation goals, off-site professional development choices, and on-site school designer support. They put structures and agreements in place to support their efforts and hold themselves accountable. Summit School makes very intentional use of its professional development slots. Decisions on which Expeditionary Learning institutes to attend are based on current school improvement goals. As their school designer, I support the teams by framing the institute beforehand, often going with the teachers to the institute, and debriefing with the teachers after the institute.

The school's off-site professional development agreement makes clear the leadership responsibilities of these teams after attending an institute. Each team presents an overview of the institute to the entire staff and puts together a documentation panel that is permanently displayed in the school. Each off-site team also identifies a specific structure or instructional practice for further significant study and accepts responsibility for the facilitation of that schoolwide collaborative work. This internal accountability creates revolving responsibility for instructional leadership (see sidebar on page 10).

Summit School leaders keep going back to the Expeditionary Learning Core Practice Benchmarks as a reminder of what a fully implemented Expeditionary Learning school looks like. To return to our dictionary definition, the benchmark document is the force that "holds things together in a mass that resists separation."



During an investigation of the Harlem Renaissance, sixth graders at Minturn Middle School were asked to make a painting in the style of Jacob Lawrence based on a personal memory. Noemi Bacio portrayed her move from Mexico to the United States (see story about Minturn on page 8).

Summit School is definitely on a roll, but it is that question of "why" that continues to hold my attention.

COMMON EXPERIENCE

Prior to working for Expeditionary Learning, my own teaching career included several opportunities to join up with a team of dedicated, intelligent, and energetic teachers. We too had intended to substantially impact the teaching and learning taking place in our school. We too worked hard to define and implement a common vision of teaching and learning. We too attended off-site professional development to inform and support our work. Each time, the experience was personally stimulating and professionally rewarding, but disappointing in terms of its schoolwide impact on teaching and learning.

In doing a compare/contrast of my experience and the experience of Summit School, the differ-

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Perspectives on Hijab:

A COHERENT APPROACH TO CONTENT AND PEDAGOGY

BY KERI TROEHLER

A pair of piercing eyes stare out from between two pieces of dark cloth. The rest of the face was hidden.

“What do you see?” I asked my classroom of ninth and tenth grade Humanities students at Renaissance Arts Academy in Portland, Oregon.

A barrage of student responses flew around the room, “Is that a woman?”

“Why do you think it’s a woman?”

“Do men hide their faces? Why not?”

When the questions ended, a multitude of voices echoed the same sentiment: “I’d never wear that.”

The photos were the hook leading into an investigation on the role of women in the Middle East, primarily Afghanistan, by looking at the issue of the hijab or burqua (full head covering). Within this larger investigation, students participated in a learning experience involving book groups. Students selected from the books *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini (Riverhead Books, 2003), *Camel Bells* by Janne Carlsson (Groundwood Books, 2003), or *The Breadwinner* (Groundwood Books, 2001).

Reading a variety of texts from multiple perspectives built their background knowledge. It later helped them choose a persuasive writing invitation that highlighted one of the diverse positions on this controversial topic and helped move students forward in their work around the writing traits, specifically word choice.

I wanted the students to gain a greater understanding of how an issue can seem very clear cut at first glance, but upon deeper examination, reveal its complexity and, ultimately, reveal its human element.

By beginning with a mystery text, I was able to assess students’ knowledge or experience with the hijab, and from there I wanted to be sure not to reinforce their beliefs too much before asking them to delve deeper into Islam and Middle Eastern culture. Using multiple perspective texts would not only allow students to explore a wider view of the issue, but would provide countless models for their own writing. I also wanted them to come out of working with those texts able to determine what was important, but also to be able to think about word choice within their own writing.

As I continued to show them a variety of images, women wearing hijab while working in an

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Now. It’s such a small word. Yet, it has so much meaning. For us, NOW stands for the National Organization for Women. But it also tells us a time. Now, is the time. Time for us women to take independence and be free...We need respect and we need that respect now! Above all, we need to stand up for women all over the world....

I have been to Afghanistan and I have seen how the women live. It’s incredible how strong they are for being treated so weak. They have to wear a chadri or burqua; they can’t leave the house without a male escort. Women have no or very little social life, even with close relatives. They aren’t allowed to work...If it wasn’t for the men, these women wouldn’t know what to do. But they need to. They need to be able to defend themselves. They need to be respected just as much as everyone else....

Katie Riley, a ninth-grade student at Renaissance Arts Academy in Portland, Oregon, wrote and presented this speech, from the perspective of a women’s rights activist speaking at the National Organization for Women’s annual conference, at a class symposium on the role of the hijab.



Moira Laughlin, a sixth grader at Minturn Middle School in Minturn, Colorado, created a painting about hiking with her grandparents in the style of painter Jacob Lawrence during an investigation on the Harlem Renaissance (see story on page 8).

Hijab, continued from page 3

office, sitting at home, teaching at school, they logged their thoughts, reactions, and opinions.

“I don’t care what someone would tell me, I’d never wear that,” a female student offered.

I posed the question, “Why would someone wear one then?”

Their responses ranged from fear to force.

“It is part of who they are.” The voice comes from a student, one who wears a hijab. Eyes turn and minds begin to open. Immediately, students start to wonder.

I realized that perhaps determining impor-

tance is not just about reading a text and making meaning, but is something we do in our daily lives. We determine what is important, in the friends we choose, the comments we make, even when we choose to come to school and participate. Perhaps students would learn that what might be important in this situation was greater understanding of our human diversity.

UNDERSTANDING
PERSPECTIVES

Students delve into the prologue for *Zoya's Story: An Afghan Woman's Struggle for Freedom* by John Follain and Rita Cristofari (William Morrow, 2002), the memoir of an Afghani woman whose parents were killed when she was 14. It is the story of her

life under Taliban rule in Afghanistan and how she became a major defender of women’s rights.

In a readers’ workshop, I modeled the reading strategy of determining importance by thinking aloud as I marked up the text on the overhead. I had students focus on words that helped us determine the author’s perspective.

They immediately pointed out the images the author creates for the reader, the way she details the weight of the burqua on many women – literally and metaphorically. But even *Zoya's Story* is only one perspective, from one part of the world. I asked them to consider if this issue exists elsewhere. In seeming chorus, they replied, “I don’t think so, the women I know would never do that.” I pushed them to go further.

So far, their experience and the texts they encountered had been in agreement—all of it reinforcing their assumptions of oppression. So, they needed exposure to varying points of view. I divided students in groups and gave them a packet containing articles, poetry, and personal narratives about the hijab from women all over the world—France, Turkey, the U.S., Egypt. I asked them to read as many of the articles as possible in a given time frame

SAVE THE LAST WORD PROTOCOL

- Divide students in groups
 - One student shares (three minutes)
 - Other students respond to the first student’s comments (one minute apiece)
 - The first speaker gets last word (one minute) for a discussion wrap-up
 - Allow each person in group to share
-

and to think about the author's point of view.

Then, students gathered more information around the author's perspective, and logged it on a recording form. They shared their perspectives using the Save the Last Word (see box on page 4) protocol. Allowing students the discussion piece also helped fill in blanks for struggling readers who did not get through all the texts.

After reading this new set of texts, students progressed from an initial, seemingly solid belief, to one that required them to ask deeper questions and ponder a world that is far less clear cut. What seemed inconceivable only days before had now become layered with a multitude of possibilities.

We returned to the initial photographs, "Now, how do you imagine these women?" Now they seemed like women who might actually have a choice. Yes, for many women the hijab does represent a sign of oppression. But for many, it is a choice, often a spiritual one.

In order to begin writing, we returned to one of the earlier articles—an editorial response to a news article about the banning of headscarves in France. Furthering our work on determining importance, we sifted through the article looking for persuasive signal words. We looked at the author's facts, her arguments, and her word choice. We returned to other articles we read and back to the recording forms. We noticed similarities in word choice and format. We capture these ideas on an anchor chart—Elements of Persuasive Writing. Now, they were ready to write and seemingly eager to do so.

Ironically, in order to write to learn, students must have a significant amount of information and background knowledge. Often, our instinct is just to get them going on it. They should jump in and the writer within will emerge. However, in my experience, that method has never evoked the writer within. In fact, it has sent the writer within running out screaming, "I don't know what to write!"

I presented the students with three writing invitations, each addressing a different perspective or situation we had learned about in

our reading. All were persuasive. I had never seen such ease in their writing. Was it the content? Was it the format? Was it the scaffolding? I fully believe it was all three, working to give them confidence to feel knowledgeable about and in control of what they were writing.

As each student presented their paper at a class symposium on the role of the hijab, students truly became an English professor submitting a poem about Afghani women for an anthology, a French school student demanding their rights to wear the hijab, and a women's rights activist speaking at the National Organization for Women's annual conference. In addition, I was able to assess their understanding of the complexity of perspectives around the role of women in the Middle East and their ability to use persuasive language in their own writing. Their writing was embedded with details, facts, persuasive words and, most importantly, reflected a multitude of perspectives. ✎

Keri Troehler teaches language arts and humanities at Renaissance Arts Academy in Portland, Oregon.

Recently in our school, there have been many debates over Afghanistan girls wearing headscarves, or 'veils' as they call them. Most people, (especially the government) are trying to ban headscarves. Why? ...If this debate continues, then I'm afraid that the number of students in my school will be fewer. Also, about 1/8th of the students in my school are from Afghanistan or at least have relatives in Afghanistan. Sure, all may not be Muslim, but still, each one of those students matter.

...Some Afghan women see wearing the headscarves as a bad thing, and if they choose that to be so, then that's their choice. Yet, if women see it as a good thing, then so what? Let them do what they choose without any confrontation.

Myan Judd, a ninth-grade student at Renaissance Arts Academy in Portland, Oregon, wrote this speech in response to a writing invitation about a French school student demanding her rights to wear the traditional head covering. The class held a symposium on the role of the hijab.

A Coherent Conversation: DIFFERENTIATING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

BY MARK CONRAD AND LORI ANDRUSIC

*What would
differentiated
professional
development
look like in
practice?*

Differentiated instruction for students has become accepted practice for many K-12 teachers. We are learning how to organize classroom instruction in order to provide students with opportunities to learn in ways that maximize their interests, strengths, talents and needs. If we have largely abandoned a “one size fits all” approach with our students, why not embrace differentiated professional development as well?

Principals and other instructional leaders need tools and structures for creating strong professional learning opportunities for all staff members. This need is especially profound in Expeditionary Learning Schools due to the challenging vision for teaching and learning outlined in the Expeditionary Learning Core Practice Benchmarks. The secret to achieving this vision, however, is seeing the coherence that lies just beneath the surface of the benchmark indicators and goals. Professional development in Expeditionary Learning schools must respect the importance of building capacity in each core practice without losing sight of the larger coherence that serves to connect various indicators. This complexity leads to the need to differentiated professional development that builds individual capacity while supporting a cohesive understanding and implementation of the Expeditionary Learning model.

UNCOVERING A STRUCTURE

What would differentiated professional development look like in practice? We began this school year at The Crossroads School, a public charter school in Baltimore, Maryland, with that question in mind. However, as with differentiated classroom teaching, we needed a

workable structure to make this vision a reality.

We wanted to uncover a structure that would lead to a series of coherent and focused conversations around important issues of school improvement. Thinking about professional development as an on-going conversation rather than an event, led us to explore models for active, collaborative inquiry that would engage teachers in an in-depth investigation of their own.

However, we knew that the investigations offered would need to reflect the interests and needs of the faculty and would require a variety of important topics to be addressed. By differentiating the offerings around interest and need, we hoped that teachers would be able to select a topic that spoke to their specific instructional concerns and goals.

PROFESSIONAL STUDY GROUPS

We developed a structure that we have come to call professional study groups. Each trimester a different set of professional study groups is developed and offered to the staff. Topics for study groups emerge directly from the benchmarks and have included 6+1 traits of writing, workshop-model instruction, using protocols effectively, and formative assessment. Ideas for other study groups have included differentiated instruction, effective fieldwork, literacy in expeditions, inquiry-based math, and classroom culture. While the possible topics for study groups are limited only by the creativity and needs of the staff, the structure for each group is consistent. Each study group meets approximately six to eight times over the course of a trimester, with each session lasting approximately 90 minutes.

The structure we developed involves a combination of three essential ingredients, each of which provides the building blocks for a powerful professional learning experience. These components are:

1. Reading common professional texts about the topic
2. Examining student work using specific protocols
3. Taking part in the Lesson Study process

The first of these involves looking at professional texts related to the topic being investigated. Sometimes this takes the form of a book-length anchor text that is read over the course of the inquiry. Other times facilitators select a series of articles relevant to the topic. This component not only provides a common text for discussion but it also allows for modeling and practicing effective literacy instructional practices.

The second component of the professional study group involves looking at student work using specific protocols. With each topic that is selected we want to ensure that teachers spend time examining student work and furthering their inquiry by asking important questions about how their topic impacts the products students create. For example, during a recent study group on the 6+1 traits of writing, participants used various analytical rubrics to determine appropriate forms of descriptive feedback about student writing. The final and most lengthy component of each study group is a formal “Lesson Study” process. Lesson study is a unique professional development protocol developed in Japan and used widely there to improve mathematics instruction (see sidebar below).

The Lesson Study procedure, while time-consuming, provides a rich and rare opportunity for a group of teachers to collaborate at all stages of the instructional process. It also allows for the unique opportunity to re-teach a lesson after allowing time for reflection and revision. The final benefit is that Lesson Study enables a team of teachers to actively investigate a significant and meaningful question in a con-

text that is firmly embedded in daily classroom practice.

FACILITATORS AS LEADERS

Facilitators of professional study groups do not need to be experts in the area being explored. Instead, they need to take responsibility for ensuring that the conversation about the topic is leading in a productive direction. This involves selecting the professional texts, making certain that student work is available for review and guiding the Lesson Study process. Facilitating a study group is time-consuming and full-time classroom teachers may need support from school designers, administrators or specialists.

The advantages of this approach to professional development are numerous. First and foremost, it provides a structure for inquiry-based professional learning that is differenti-

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LESSON STUDY

Four to six teachers convene to discuss a specific instructional question. In a recent example at Crossroads, the team discussed how teachers could structure protocols so that all students were active participants.

To answer the question, they follow a sequence of steps:

1. The team of teachers collaboratively plans a lesson that they hope will shed light on the question they have asked.
2. Teachers select a group of students with whom they implement the lesson. One teacher then teaches the lesson while the other members of the team observe, take notes, and listen carefully to student responses.
3. The teachers reflect on their observations and revise the lesson.
4. The revised lesson is taught again to another group of students while the team of teachers again observes and records student responses.
5. The team reconvenes for a third meeting to discuss conclusions and new questions that arise from the teaching of the revised lessons. Ideally, these reflections can be summarized and clarified to the point that they can then be shared with colleagues through writing, presenting or modeling.

—Mark Conrad & Lori Andrusic

For an introduction to the Lesson Study protocol see [The Teaching Gap](#) by James Stigler and James Hiebert (Free Press, 1999).

FIRST-YEAR REPORT: A COHERENT AND PURPOSEFUL BEGINNING

BY SYMON HAYES AND TONI BOUSH

My life as a teacher will never be the same!

Seventh-grade teacher Stephanie Gallegos,
after a reading institute.

*A*t Minturn Middle School, a public school nestled high in the mountains of Colorado, we have been working hard to hone our skills in the science of teaching. As part of a districtwide reform initiative, we learned to develop thoughtful lessons with explicit learning targets and we started each work day with strategy-based meetings led by our instructional coaches. As a result, the major elements of good teaching and learning were in place. Yet, we knew something was missing. We were good at the science of teaching, but we were missing the art—the passion that comes with relevant learning and a unified culture. We lacked a common purpose and clearly defined expectations for both teachers and students.

We heard about Expeditionary Learning and felt that it might offer a coherent model that would unite the vision of our staff, parents, and students. But we gave it considerable thought before we made a commitment. For a year, we studied the model, held community meetings, and gained the support of the district. In addition, we raised funds, ultimately raising half of the necessary money from our local community. When we officially became an Expeditionary Learning school at the beginning of this year, we were ready. We began by discussing what we wanted our school to look like in the long term, and then built a work plan for our first-year goals, based on the Expeditionary Learning Core Practice Benchmarks, keeping those larger goals in mind. We are a school that has harnessed the energy of purposeful, coherent planning and decision-making and we have sprung into life.

CHARACTER AND CULTURE

It is impossible not to feel the unique character of Minturn and the energy of our diverse population of students as you walk through the school. As one sixth-grade student put it, “Minturn is a school where students get along. It’s full of joy and friendship.” As a staff, however, we have not been purposeful or direct in harnessing character growth and individual responsibility. Character targets were missing in our teaching.

Our new goal is for character to be embedded within the curriculum and become a driving force within the school culture. We do not have a separate character culture. Teachers are making conscious decisions to incorporate specific character targets in our lessons, in particular focusing on the discreet skills necessary for collaborative work. For example, in one teacher’s class where students are participating in book clubs, a character target is, “I can contribute positively to the conversation.”

At the beginning of the school day, all students attend a multiage mini-crew class focused on shared literacy. Our first whole school read aloud—*Seedfolks* by Paul Fleischman (Harper Trophy, 1999)—has engaged students in discussions about character traits and has prepared them to select the positive character traits that all members of the school should strive to achieve. As we embark on our next read aloud—*The Circuit* by Francisco Jimenez (University of New Mexico Press, 1999)—the staff is collaborating to identify areas within the text that provide opportunities for the Expeditionary Learning Design Principles to be introduced to students in a relevant way. This essential element is now being woven into content with purpose and meaning, and the design principles provide a common language for us to discuss character and culture within our school.

HIGH-QUALITY PUBLIC PRODUCTS

As a second goal, we wanted to increase student motivation to produce high-quality work. Projects leading students to create products for authentic audiences help students not only meet standards, but give meaning to the hard work of building skills and learning content. For this year, each teacher has agreed to develop at least one learning experience leading to a high-quality, public product that demonstrates students' understanding of key content and skills. We are laying the foundation and defining the critical attributes of a schoolwide quality product.

Quality products are already beginning to bring the community into the classroom and take the classroom into the community. Students recently participated in a poetry reading at a local coffee house, sharing their creative writing with a very real audience.

On an evening in December, parents and students transformed the school gymnasium into an elegant dinner theater. Pre-dinner activities included a silent auction fundraiser and a showcase of student work from all classes (see related art work on pages 1, 2, and 4). Following the dinner that was enjoyed by 150 community members, the sixth-grade performing arts and visual arts students presented their interpretation of "Harlem", a poem by Walter Dean Myers. They produced a spectacular performance of music, art, dance, and dialogue explaining their understanding of the Harlem Renaissance. As parents and teachers left the makeshift theater, we were left with the knowledge that as a community, everything is possible. Besides celebrating our students' learning, we raised \$7,300 to help fund our work with Expeditionary Learning.

The Harlem Renaissance investigation rejuvenated teacher Wendy Satsky, who has taught at Minturn for 25 years. "The combination of presenting meaningful content, creative and collaborative planning and teaching, and students showcasing their learning as a performance for the larger community worked its magic on me. I was almost ready to retire from teaching, but now I feel energized, knowing that these kinds of experiences are what makes education fun for me too!"


LONG-TERM PLANNING

Our third identified goal is to change our school structures to promote teacher collaboration and teamwork. Our focus on instructional strategies has

provided a common pedagogical language and a solid foundation. However, teachers need to collaborate more in order to teach in a meaningful and integrated way. Having identified this as a weakness, we are now carefully evaluating our current structures and planning for significant changes for next year. Teachers will be switching to a team configuration, resulting in the daily teaching schedule looking dramatically different, incorporating team planning time, crew, and long uninterrupted blocks of time for teams to work with 'their' students.

In addition to putting structures in place that ensure time for collaboration and teamwork, we are also working on creating meaningful and integrated learning experiences. This year, we have already introduced LEO, the online planning tool for Expeditionary Learning teachers, which has provided a platform for dialogue between grade level and content teachers. Teachers are working toward lessons that contain not only clear and thoughtful academic learning targets, but also intentionally integrated targets focused on literacy, craftsmanship, and character. Teachers are designing learning experiences that include sequenced lessons. Beginning here has allowed us to have good conversations in an arena with which we were already familiar.

Meanwhile, we are creating a curriculum map designating standards and expeditions that will be taught starting next year. Designing the curriculum map now allows us several months to carefully plan quality expeditions that will be repeated in years to come. Teachers have already eagerly begun to plan their first expeditions for next year.

A schoolwide purpose has brought coherence and a focus that raises the level of expectations and possibilities. It has opened our eyes to see the big picture and the potential of what our students can achieve. Witnessing our students sharing quality products in the community has brought a very real sense of pride, knowing that what we do matters. Through a coherent beginning with Expeditionary Learning, we have brought a new sense of commitment and joy to our school and to the learning of our students. 

Symon Hayes is instructional guide and Toni Boush is principal at Minturn Middle School in Minturn, Colorado. Cyndi Gueswel, Minturn's school designer, assisted in writing this article.

A schoolwide purpose has brought coherence and a focus that raises the level of expectations and possibilities. It has opened our eyes to see the big picture and the potential of what our students can achieve.

LEADING COLLEAGUES

Teams of teachers at Summit School are responsible for facilitating a study of a structure or instructional practice learned at an off-site Expeditionary Learning institute. The teams provide ongoing support to teachers interested in exploring that structure or practice. For example:

- Daily morning crew meeting. The team ran a pilot project exploring the effectiveness of daily crew meetings. At the pilot's conclusion, the staff voted unanimously to adopt morning crew meetings as a schoolwide practice.
- Building Background Knowledge Workshop (BBK). Two teams put together a BBK for the staff and generated a great deal of interest in the BBK as an instructional practice. They have continued to support teachers in putting together BBK workshops related to their expeditions.

Logical Connections, continued from page 2


ences are worth analyzing. My personal and collaborative attempts to impact schoolwide teaching and learning lacked coherence in specific areas. First, the common vision driving change was not well articulated or stable. There was no structure in place to resist the forces of vision-drift. Next, the professional development opportunities that informed the work lacked coherence and while individually valuable, collectively dissipated energy rather than harnessing it.

I now understand that systemic change is dependent on the existence of coherent professional development (both on-site and off-site) that supports and informs the work of the school's professional staff. I am now convinced that professional development works best when it is the outgrowth of a well-articulated and coherent model for teaching and learning that remains relatively constant. The Expeditionary Learning benchmarks provide a roadmap for implementation of a coherent model. The organization's national policies and procedures provide the proper amount of resistance to keep the model relatively stable while still including changes that reflect the powerful collaborative thinking of our national network of teachers who are actively implementing the model in their classrooms and schools every day.

Because the national offerings are all developed to support the implementation of the same model, each national institute reflects the coherence of the model itself. Each institute requires the active par-

ticipation of the participants. Each institute includes the consistent use of nationally recognized work on reading, writing and assessment that has been thoughtfully modified to be consistent with Expeditionary Learning. Each institute engages the teacher-learners in a compelling topic that builds intellectual curiosity and provides a context for the institute's targeted focus. Each national institute embeds literacy practices and strategies within a compelling topic in the same way that teachers are asked to embed literacy instruction inside content in their personal practice. Each institute employs strong instructional practices that promote equity and the social construction of meaning. Each institute models crew meetings and other structures that build culture and collaboration and active engagement.

For Summit School, this consistency across institutes allows teachers who attend different institutes to collaborate. The teams are able to build on each others' work and develop common understandings of foundational concepts and practices. The work that is brought back to the school by one instructional leadership team is reinforced by the experience of teams that follow. The work of that team paves the way for the work of the next. All of the work "hangs together" in a coherent way.

Restricting participation to teachers from across the nation who are in the network, and are implementing the same model, allows the training to build on itself and engage participants in rigorous, collaborative work based on shared experiences, understandings, language and implementation goals. Informal sharing between colleagues is more focused and relevant. Professional networks develop that push the thinking of individual teachers and offer a wider circle of collaborative thinking to support the improvement of teaching and learning in all Expeditionary Learning schools. It seems that the people too become, to quote our online definition, "elements or parts logically connected so that aesthetic consistency results." They too "stick together in a mass that resists separation." 

Lorri Edwards is a school designer in the Northwest region.

Early Literacy Institute:

INTERSECTION OF CONTENT, PEDAGOGY AND LITERACY

BY STEVEN LEVY

I didn't know or care much about them before, but now they capture my attention on a daily basis. Dragonflies – they are everywhere! It is amazing how knowing and caring complement each other. The more I know about something, the more I care; and the more I care, the more I want to know. I do not just see dragonflies, I pay attention to them. Is there any purpose to their chaotic flight patterns? Are they searching for food or for a mate? Dragonflies take their place among the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, Japanese internment camps, and Indian boarding schools, all topics I have come to know and care about through Expeditionary Learning reading and writing institutes.

I met the dragonflies at the Early Literacy Institute, which like other institutes, weaves content, active pedagogy and literacy together to build just enough background knowledge to inspire inquiry. The unique feature of this institute is the focus on learning to read at the primary level. Is there a way to teach phonics through active pedagogy? What other reading strategies are important for our beginning readers, and what have we learned about how to teach them?

The institute is built on five reading components outlined in the National Report on Reading: phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency, decoding, and reading comprehension. We engaged in many rich and varied learning experiences to learn about these facets. Some were clearly literacy centered like shared reading, literature circles, and interactive writing. Others were not so obviously connected to literacy, like fieldwork, science talks, or building background knowledge workshops. But when we debriefed each of these learning experiences, we were often surprised to find how many ways they addressed the five essentials of the National Report on Reading. We discovered how compelling topics and active

pedagogy worked together to promote the acquisition of primary reading skills—one of the major learning targets of the institute. They also worked together, along with skillful facilitation, to create a culture that invited all of the 30 participants into a collaborative community and supported each of us in our learning.

Another primary learning target of the institute is to understand *how to exploit students' natural capacities as problem solvers and pattern finders to teach basic early literacy skills like phonics*. Many practical strategies to do this were modeled both within the content of the expedition and through other structures like morning meeting and readers' workshop. Particularly helpful to many of us were videos of the facilitator's kindergarten classroom, where we could see what our learning experiences looked like in the minds and hearts of five year olds. Humbling, indeed.

It has been a month since the institute. I am sitting on warm sand at the edge of Walden Pond, having trouble concentrating on the conclusion of this reflection because two Green Darners have assumed their acrobatic mating pose on the stage of a long green leaf about three feet from my head. I am immediately brought back to the friends I made at the institute. Thirty adults came together, so diverse in our teaching experience, our background knowledge, our understanding of Expeditionary Learning, and yet we became true colleagues for a few days, equally intrigued and engaged, learning to read in a world of dragonflies together. Now I remember that other important learning target of the institute. *Teaching content is a way to achieve equity.* ✍

Steven Levy is a school designer in the Northeast region.

The more I know about something, the more I care; and the more I care, the more I want to know. I do not just see dragonflies, I pay attention to them.

FIELDWORK

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Conversations, continued from page 7

ated to meet the immediate needs and goals of teachers. Second, it shifts the focus of professional development away from sporadic and isolated events and creates an ongoing and coherent conversation about teaching and learning that is targeted and specific. Finally, it allows teacher-leaders on the faculty to take a visible and important role with colleagues in facilitating professional development activities.

DO THEY WORK?

At Crossroads, we are assessing the effectiveness of professional study groups in two primary ways. The first of these is through teacher feedback. Conversations, surveys, and evaluations are all effective ways of asking teachers directly if the study groups are meeting their needs. The second way in which we as-

sess effectiveness is through improved instructional practices in the classroom. Knowing which study group a teacher selected can help administrators know where to focus descriptive feedback and where to provide additional assistance and support.

While professional study groups do not replace the need for whole-staff professional development, they do provide a powerful structure for conducting focused and coherent learning opportunities for faculty members. Ironically perhaps, it is the differentiation that these groups allow that leads to greater coherence across the school. 

Mark Conrad is director of instruction at The Crossroads School in Baltimore, Maryland. Lori Andrusic is a school designer in the Midatlantic region.