



How to Approach Teacher Collaboration

Teacher collaboration occurs when members of a learning community work together to increase student learning and achievement. If our ultimate destination as educators is student achievement, think of teacher collaboration as the journey. Collaboration is not a task to complete then move on, it's an ever-changing, ongoing process that is only enhanced by social networks and access to new technology.

The beauty of collaboration is not only the ability to tap into various perspectives and ideas, but also to share responsibility for our students' learning. The more people invested in a student's education, the better the chance that student has to be successful.

So, why is it that effective collaboration among teachers is not happening in any formalized or regular way despite the obvious benefits? It could be that some educators are unaware of the myriad benefits, or simply haven't put the time or effort into the collaboration process. Let's take a deeper look into how teacher collaboration benefits everyone involved.

Benefits of Teacher Collaboration

When teachers come together to share information, resources, ideas, and expertise, learning becomes more accessible and effective for students. Collaborating means purposefully building interpersonal relationships and working towards healthy interdependence, which occurs when teachers are comfortable giving and receiving help without forfeiting accountability.

When we get teachers co-planning and co-teaching based on a shared vision, here are some of the benefits we can expect:

- **Increased Academic Effort**—Since teachers who collaborate on instruction are all on the same page, they [can increase the level of academic rigor](#) to match the core competencies they want students to meet.
- **Increased Understanding of Student Data**—Teachers are better equipped to deconstruct relevant data (and implement effective solutions) from both formative and summative assessments. They also have a sense of shared responsibility for celebrating success and analyzing failure.
- **More Creative Lesson Plans**—When teachers communicate and share ideas, they also share an enlarged repertoire of instructional strategies that encourage creative instruction. Colleagues may be influenced to try different approaches or have opportunities to help a peer with a new approach.
- **Less Teacher Isolation**—While teachers should not feel forced to collaborate to avoid any “contrived congeniality,” having the opportunity to share ideas and information [combats professional loneliness and frustration](#) which improves staff morale and professional satisfaction.

The best part about the benefits of teacher collaboration is that they can be a reality—as they are in so many learning communities around the world. The key is acknowledging, understanding, and working diligently to overcome the challenges and obstacles standing in the way of high-quality teacher collaboration.

Challenges of Effective Teacher Collaboration

According to the [Global State of Digital Learning Survey](#), more than 30% of teachers, and nearly 50% of administrators report that teacher collaboration is a top priority for them. When we learned that almost 30% of those administrators believe that getting their teachers to collaborate is one of their biggest challenges, we tend to wonder where the disconnect is.

For many schools, teacher collaboration is uncharted territory, leaving the practice unstructured and inconsistent. The most common challenges of high-quality, effective teacher collaboration are:

- **Lack of a True Professional Learning Community (PLC)**—PLCs are a powerful tool in education and school reform. Without a [commitment to the PLC process](#), teacher collaboration can seem forced and challenging.
- **Lack of Planning, Collaboration, or Reflection Time**—Many teachers and administrators feel like there are not enough hours in the school day. The most common challenge of effective collaboration is a lack of time to focus on working together. While this reason may occasionally be used to mask other issues—like personality conflicts or fear of judgment—it is still worth noting that planning time is a valuable resource for educators that should be embedded in their teaching responsibilities.
- **Personality Conflicts and Territoriality**—Collaborative groups are comprised of multiple personalities and unique belief systems which can lead to unproductive experiences.

The Role of Technology in Teacher Collaboration

Despite these challenges, data proves that Professional Learning Communities (PLC) and Professional Learning Networks (PLN) are extremely effective methods of teacher collaboration that have a direct influence on student engagement and achievement, as well as growth for the educators who work with them.

Technology plays a major role in modern teacher collaboration. Actively [participating in a PLN on a social network](#) gives you direct access to the knowledge, experience, and resources of countless educators who you may have never connected with in your immediate professional circles.

Twitter is an amazing digital hub for educators and educational resources. Create an account or log in to the one you haven't used since 2013 and follow educators you admire. Take it a step further by [participating in relevant Twitter Chats](#)—when a group of Twitter users (Tweeters?) meet at a predetermined time to discuss a particular topic.

Also, don't forget about the built-in capabilities that your district's learning management system (LMS) offers. You probably already have the tools to connect with colleagues and share ideas in an online community tailored to your district or school. If it has the communication and sharing tools you need, your LMS is the perfect place to create common assessments, track student data, share resources, and keep assignments.

If you're part of a PLC school in which educators gather regularly for in-person collaborative sessions, technology is still a tool for high-quality collaboration. Have access to your LMS in these meetings as a place to create instructional content, store lesson plans and resources, and analyze student data—with the added benefit of live human interaction.

Video technology aids teacher collaboration, as well. Record lessons to use for professional development and coaching in collaborative meetings. Or collaborate with teams of teachers on other campuses via video chat applications like [Google Hangouts](#) or [Zoom](#).

However you choose to collaborate, take note of these effective strategies to get the best out of your efforts.

Effective Teacher Collaboration Strategies

In order for teacher collaboration to be effective, teachers should want to participate, rather than feel like they have to. Collaboration, just like any other skill, can be honed and improved upon with practice. Here are a few strategies to set the stage for successful, high-quality teacher collaboration:

- **Develop and Agree Upon a Shared Vision and Mutual Goals**—The level of ownership teachers feel about the process determines how much time and energy they really put into collaborating. Having a shared vision and mutual goals can lead to the buy-in required for teachers to have a genuine sense of ownership.
- For example, if your team identifies that it is committed to building relationships with students and student learning, set goals related to that vision, discuss how to reach the goals, and assess progress regularly.
- **Foster a Sense of Community**—Collaboration is all about building relationships. Taking the time to get to know your colleagues and relate on a personal level develops a greater sense of respect and trust. Like any relationship, collaborative teams take time to develop and increase in strength and productivity over time.

- **Establish Group Norms and Expectation**—Unfortunately collaboration can be stressful and uncomfortable at times. Educators are typically passionate about their work and beliefs which causes us to be vulnerable in groups of people who know our strengths and weaknesses. It's important to develop a culture of trust, respect, and humility for everyone to thrive. Your team should delegate roles and responsibilities, as well as protocols for communication and time management.

- **Leverage Discussion to Work Through Conflicts**—Dialogue can actually lead to deep professional learning for educators as they explore new ideas for teaching. Dialogue requires active listening, a willingness to share ideas, and a belief in the power of communication.

- Discussion is made up of dialogue intended to build consensus or make decisions. Although dialogue opens doors to new possibilities, it can also open the door to conflict. It's a good idea to develop a conflict management plan, monitor your own emotions, and always use your professional judgment.

Though Challenging, Collaboration Benefits Teachers and Students

Strong collaborative cultures develop over time and require effort and commitment to the process. While the benefits are undeniable, true collaboration is complex. Common planning time, PLCs, and PLNs are all effective methods of teacher collaboration.

With time, teachers can develop genuine collaborative teams in which they share goals, engage in mutually beneficial professional learning, use communal resources to increase student achievement, and advance their own skills, knowledge, and beliefs related to student learning.

Interested in learning how you can use Schoology's LMS to help teachers collaborate better?

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