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## Reinvigorating Classroom Practice through Collaborative K-12 and Higher Education Professional Development

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# Reinvigorating Classroom Practice Through Collaborative K-12 and Higher Education Professional Development

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*High school, community college, and university faculty attempted to address student readiness for first-year college English classes by working across sectors in a collaborative professional development project, Successful Transitions to College (STC). STC demonstrates that teachers can smooth transitions for students who navigate multiple educational systems throughout their K-16 experience. STC intentionally built opportunities for collaborative work while honoring teaching expertise and shared problem solving. Interest in student transition across sectors has created a fresh realization for many teachers—one of the best ways to impact student success is to better understand what happens for our students before and after each particular grade level. Professional development that values veteran teacher experience, leadership, and initiative can provide pivotal opportunities to reinvigorate classroom practice.*

**Keywords:** Professional Development, College Readiness, English Language Arts

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## Introduction

As students cycle through schools and classrooms from one academic year to the next, teachers are ideally positioned to see trends emerging—systemic patterns in teaching, learning, and educational practice. Why do many students struggle reading complex texts, for example? How can we help students build the critical thinking skills they are still developing? In what ways can we nurture their ability to persevere as they move from one grade to the next or from high school to college courses? We may wonder about these patterns as we grade the next set of essays, talk about struggling students in our department meetings, or even point fingers at teachers in grades below or above ours, but that’s often where it stops—at the noticing.

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Over the last few years, however, a group of high school teachers, community college faculty, and university faculty attempted to address student readiness for their first-year college English classes by working with each other across sectors. Instructors' dedication to an ongoing, collaborative professional development project created lasting relationships and encouraged problem solving outside of any one classroom or grade level. The Successful Transitions to College (STC) project (2018) demonstrates that teachers can work across sectors to smooth transitions for students who often navigate multiple educational systems throughout their K-16 experience. This interest in the transition across academic sectors has created, for many of the teachers involved in this project, a fresh realization: that one of the best ways for us to impact student success is to better understand what happens in the classrooms before and after ours. This professional development work intentionally built opportunities for teachers and faculty to work together in ways that honored teaching expertise and encouraged shared problem solving.

Professional development that values veteran teacher experience, leadership, and initiative can provide pivotal opportunities to reinvigorate classroom practice. An inquiry-based approach (Palmisano, 2013), where teacher participants are asking the essential questions, posing problems of practice, and exploring possible solutions and interventions allows classroom teachers to navigate difficult issues of teaching and learning as actively engaged directors of their own professional development. What follows is an accounting of a regional collaborative professional development project designed and implemented from that philosophical perspective. The narrative voice is that of two members of the project leadership—one a director of a secondary English education teacher education program at a four-year regional comprehensive university and the other a community college English composition instructor. The other voices interspersed throughout—LouAnn and Katie—are veteran high school English teachers,

participants in the regional professional development project, and critical contributors to the project's success.

### *Successful Transitions to College Overview*

*STC* is a sustained regional professional development project that connected approximately 25 English language arts (ELA) faculty members from a four-year regional comprehensive university, an area community college, and both urban and rural area school districts with the goal of helping students more effectively navigate the transition from high school to college ELA expectations. Specifically, the primary objectives of the project were to (1) strengthen the alignment of ELA curriculum and instruction across the region's schools and colleges; (2) facilitate K-12 and higher education faculties working together on full adoption of Common Core State Standards (CCSS); and (3) ensure that greater numbers of the region's students, especially low-income students, smoothly transition from high school to college.

Through the *STC* project, a professional network was established that allowed K-12 and higher education faculty collaboration to take hold over time as regional educational leaders worked together on identifying issues of alignment, both curricular and instructional. The project provided time and resources for faculty members to develop, research, test, and apply solutions to shared problems of practice across institutions. Key components of the project included a close and collective examination of CCSS and observations in each other's classrooms. This constructivist and collaborative approach (Annenberg, 2004; Wenger 1998) was informed by scholarship promoting changes to teaching practices across sectors in order to more effectively support students in the transition from high school to college (Conley, 2012). Research in adult learning theories (Brookfield, 1988; Trivette, Dunst, Hamby, & O'Herin, 2009) and cognitive motivational theories (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997) were used to create optimal conditions for

educators to share expertise and collaborate in ways that are highly productive. Additionally, the approach was shaped by research on best practices in the development of both professional learning communities (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009) and networked improvement communities (Bryk, Gomez, & Grunow, 2011). With the state's adoption of CCSS, with a strong cooperative spirit in place, and with thoughtfully constructed collaboration, regional high school and college ELA educators participated in a unique opportunity to share their deep concerns and to accelerate student gains in ELA achievement.

### **High School and Higher Education Connections**

The STC project collaboration focused on development and testing of instructional approaches to measurably improve teaching and learning in ELA. Utilizing a collaborative inquiry approach to establishing iterative classroom interventions, and incorporating Palmisano's approaches to conceptually expand systemic inquiry, project leaders established a three-year plan to move participants through the inquiry phases, which include investigating shared problems or questions of practice; learning with and from colleagues; seeking expertise and perspectives of others beyond the inquiry group; using evidence and data; acting, reflecting, and refining practice; and sharing and connecting learning (Palmisano, 2013). Professional learning cohorts composed of regional high school, community college, and university ELA faculty were established at the outset of the project, and cohorts were developed intentionally to include teachers from both rural and urban low-income school districts, four-year university, and two-year community college faculty. Much of the initial work was focused on instructors becoming familiar with the organizational structures and student experience in each other's academic settings, as noted by LouAnn:

*After more than three decades as a college preparatory ELA teacher, the time was finally before me to intensely collaborate with post-secondary English instructors in an effort to enhance our*

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*instruction and increase student learning. From our first meeting, I was the solo secondary teacher amongst two college instructors. I felt responsible to be the voice for all members of the secondary learning community—students and teachers alike. During the 36 months, I shared appropriate expectations of learning for high schoolers; for example, high school seniors need structure within the writing process in the form of prescribed and proven prewriting strategies as well as guided writing practice time in a workshop setting so that they may quickly access their teacher for assistance. My higher education instructors complemented such expectations with their perspectives on skills instruction, classroom procedures like late work policies, and how to seek additional help from writers' centers and instructor's office hours.*

The STC professional network met three times annually for three years and utilized additional phone, online, and face-to-face meetings as needed. Each major convening included area administrators in order to strengthen ties within and across sectors. Based on our understanding of best practices in professional development, we emphasized building strong working relationships to help schools be strategic in creating time and productive working relationships within and across academic departments and grade levels toward greater consistency in instruction, willingness to collaborate, and increased success in solving problems of practice (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2009). Katie's words echo the strengthening of those personal ties:

*When I first joined the STC project, I was quite overwhelmed by the undertaking as I stepped in late for a colleague who couldn't commit to the amount of time required. After the first meeting where we connected with our vertical teams consisting of high school, community college, and university English instructors, I was ecstatic realizing I now had access to the rare opportunity of learning about instructional practices and expectations in our local higher educational institutions. When the college instructors shared instructional material and student work in our group meetings, I knew I needed to take it back to my seniors to create "buy in" so that I could increase rigor quickly. Realizing where these seniors were and where they would need to be in less than one year, I was able to change the way I was teaching, and my seniors were able to make huge gains in the difficulty of text we were reading and in the quality of writing they were producing.*

As Katie's words suggest, year one project activities included creating cohesive cohort groups involved in defining specific problems of practice. By the end of the first year, each cohort identified a specific problem of practice to investigate and reached agreement on shared goals. Years two and three focused on cohort groups generating solutions and iteratively testing and

improving those classroom interventions focused on addressing their specific problem of practice.

### Teacher Inquiry Projects

Prior to choosing a problem of practice, project participants examined and discussed the CCSS in ELA/Literacy and the ELA portraits of college-ready students in order to create descriptions of characteristics they sought to help their own students develop. Next, they identified issues that affect students' development of these ideal characteristics; each cohort of instructors was asked to identify a problem of practice regarding teaching and learning that negatively affects students' likelihood of placement into and successfully completing college-level classes.

The collaborative analysis of learning standards demonstrated that each of the major shared problems of practice identified by STC participants (see below) are also key areas of focus for *both* college level literacy standards, the Council of Writing Program Administrators Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition (2014), and K-12 literacy standards, the CCSS (Agriss, Reid, & Young, 2016). Katie describes the development of her problem of practice:

*The first year seemed as if it was more about just figuring out our “problem of practice” which we thought would be easy but, in reality, it was much more difficult than we expected as there are so many variables that impede college students’ ability to perform at the “college level.” Through our discussion of “college ready” versus “college level,” I learned that although my instructional practices and strategies aligned well with developing “college ready” students, the rigor in my course did not prepare “college level” readers and writers. Because of that first year experience, I knew the following September my senior English classes would look and feel completely different in terms of text complexity and writing expectations. Because I knew it would shock my new seniors, I started with looking at English 101 portfolio requirements and a couple of examples to talk about how we transition from high school to college expectations. I explained to my students that the college instructors indicated English 101 students were most lacking in their ability to sustain reading rigorous text while maintaining comprehension and also writing more extensive analysis and argumentative type papers.*



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Cohorts' collaborative cross-sector inquiry of their own teaching practices, related to the reading and writing CCSS, led to common identified problems of practice for both high school and college students: (1) the ability to engage effectively at every stage in the composing process, (2) the ability to critically read a range of texts, and (3) the ability to effectively use appropriate sources while integrating outside texts with original written content. LouAnn described her problem of practice and her learning:

*My student artifacts of summary and academic writing were met with eagerness as my post-secondary partners wanted to know the prior knowledge and skills taught before his or her English 101 classes. We became centered on the scope and sequence of the ELA CCSS, freshmen composition skills, and instructor methodology to increase student mastery of our focused skills. We discovered that, in each of our classroom settings, students connect to the text throughout the reading process as well as connecting to prior sections of the text. Predictions finalize each interaction so that students make inferences of future events based on the aforementioned connections. Students focus on synonyms to the key words, and they integrate these critical words into a fully developed, strong summary with rich supporting main ideas including the author's purpose.*

Katie echoed similar themes:

*Rather than reading shorter literary fictional pieces, students started grappling with novels that allowed for modern connections and deeper writing. Students hated the process of reading the material, but respected the fact that they were better readers because of the struggle. During and at the end of each piece we also discussed and evaluated our "growth mindset" as that was, yet, another focus at my cohort's institutions, so we started talking about them occasionally in senior English to try to build a more successful transition to college reading through the awareness of thought processes. Because the reading was more rigorous, it was absolutely necessary for me to scaffold for my students how to annotate text for their reading purpose rather than just annotate random information hoping it's the right information when they started writing. Many students know text to self, text to text and text to world, but if they don't know the purpose for making such connections, they do it at times where other types of annotations would have been more beneficial. This was a huge shift for my students and in my instructional practices because I was more intentional with how they were being students.*

Throughout the three years of the project, collaboration focused on the development and testing of instructional approaches to measurably improve teaching and learning in ELA. By the end of

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the third year, cohorts created a collaborative online resource, a toolkit (“Successful Transitions,” 2018), containing all cohort and leadership group processes, interventions, and solutions for use by other ELA instructors. LouAnn described the development of the toolkit contributions:

*Our toolkit developed as a result of this discourse. Even though we had no assigned leader among our three cohort members, the appreciation was profound for our shared best practices and commonalities of instruction. One such best practice is apparent in our toolkit item. We all stress the importance of deciphering the main message from an author in a summary. We all determined that this analytical ability crosses multiple writing genres. This interdependent thinking allowed my knowledge of summarization to expand to a multitude of texts including podcasts, videos, free-verse poetry. My cohort enabled my students to explore genres using a proven tool. I am proud to have developed a teaching tool with my cohort members that can be used in English 12 classes as well as post-secondary college level classes using a multitude of genres to interact continuously with the text while deciphering key words.*

### **Participant Professional Development**

In terms of pedagogy, we learned several significant things from the K-12 and higher education collaborative STC project. Initially examining the standards together and observing each other’s classrooms encouraged instructors to question their assumptions about students’ experiences. We learned that challenges are ongoing and shared for instructors, that students’ skills and content development are recursive and gradual, and that teachers would do well to understand that we are helping students get to the next level with a skill rather than expecting mastery by the time they arrive in the next classroom. Instructors targeted difficult, but shared, aspects of teaching and learning that helped them see student experiences in a variety of classroom settings, while initiating a process to become cross-sector partners in search of solutions. LouAnn described how the cohort structure supported her learning:

*I dedicated myself to my cohort from our first day and left each meeting energized to guide my own practice as my students’ ability to reach the CCSS is more evident and pronounced having explored and created a tool for summarization as a key to critical*

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*reading. My confidence as a secondary ELA teacher and determination to impact student learning was indeed accomplished with our Toolkit Item. My students' level of skills development was strongly considered and honored. My instruction and guidance are now based on current post-secondary ELA instruction so that my high school students graduate prepared for the next level of reading and writing education.*

Katie described how the learning was both immediate and long-term:

*After three years of working with the Successful Transition grant, I can definitely say that my instructional practices have not just adjusted, but my entire philosophical approach to teaching (seniors especially) has shifted because rather than guessing what my students might need, I now have a firm grasp what most of them will encounter at our local colleges, and I have instructional practices that align with developing more "college level" students rather than "college ready" as they might have been before participating in this grant.*

### **Cross-Sector Learning**

Some of the specific cross-sector teaching take-aways are that first-year college students traditionally have had little in-depth experience with the academic discourse community (Lea & Street, 2006) which focuses on independent learning, critical reading and writing, and critical thinking and problem solving; the CCSS focus on "[r]eading, writing, and speaking grounded in evidence from texts, both literary and informational," can be understood as an effort to address this transitional challenge before students enter college (Agriss, Reid, & Young, 2016); successful implementation of CCSS requires a focus on independence, reading, writing, and critical thinking in ELA; and a focus on literacy across sectors has the potential to improve student success in reading and writing, and also in the content areas themselves. LouAnn described both the content-area learning and the surprise additional development of leadership qualities:

*Once our focus for our item was in place, I found myself honing my leadership skills within our cohort. I had to hear the instructional layers during our discussions to finally find the precise standard to address. My cohort members were not aware of the CCSS and seemed thankful to have an exact skill to center our work on for the remainder of our time together. When our meetings would return to our initial concentration of "Content Area Reading," I would gently remind them that we had our attention now on a*

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*particular skill rather than the large area of “Content Area Reading.” I had to listen to my inner leader so that we would continue with our chosen path of study. Finding the right way to deliver such a message with the right tone was a growth moment I did not expect; however, I thrive on developing my teaching and sensibility as an instructional leader and was thankful that my partners were open to me “whipping us back” into focus.*

In terms of organizational take-aways, perhaps the biggest was the importance of recognizing that all educational sectors—K-12, community colleges, and four-year universities—need to support a deeper collaboration and a clearer understanding of the range of systems which students must navigate. It was important to meet regularly, and just as important was project leaders’ ability to adapt the process to the makeup of the groups and adjust to follow the inquiry paths of project participants. We also learned that it is important to share the project work through regional and national conferences and through publications to raise awareness and garner feedback.

### **Conclusion**

For this group of instructors, the fresh start was not the new quarter or the next class; rather, it was the recognition that we all share the responsibility for helping students succeed. Faculty from high schools, community colleges, and the universities are working to better understand the expectations placed on students in all sectors. Collaboration on this work will inform participants of differing expectations among sectors, facilitate identification of gaps in the curriculum within and among sectors, and allow faculty to work together across sectors to better assist students in successfully transitioning from high to college. It is not enough to notice patterns of need in student readiness at specific grade levels. These are not “your students” one year and “my students” the next—these are “our students” that we have in our classrooms for a

brief moment in their educational journeys. We owe it to them work together to make their paths through our educational system as smooth and successful as possible.

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