



Imagine 47

Organizational Capacity for Collaboration and Inclusion



Powell River School District
Powell River, British Columbia

Plato to Socrates: moving beyond inquiry

In public education there is an expressed need for engagement through collaboration and inclusive processes. The critical question becomes one of capacity. How might we build models of engagement that reflect a new set of skills and understandings? What might leadership look like? What implications might this have for the structure and function of public education?

This article outlines beginning steps in one district toward a more inclusive model of engagement and governance.

It all began innocently enough with a request for teacher feedback on Professional Development. The feedback was loud and clear. Teachers wanted something different. They requested time to work with colleagues on projects of interest through a process that was teacher driven and collaborative.

As the Professional Development Committee it was our task to address this issue and offer an alternative. We began by asking Charlie Naylor, an academic researcher to speak at our district day on the nature of teacher inquiry and share his experiences working with other districts using this model. This experience cultivated teacher interest and, we engaged in a two-year Collaborative Inquiry initiative. At the end of two years the majority of teachers in the district were actively engaged in inquiry focused on questions of practice at the classroom, school, district and/or community level.

While success of the inquiry project was certainly encouraging it was not without its challenges. As teachers worked through their inquiry they began to conceptualize outcomes and possible plans for implementation. They were excited and ready for action. It did not take long to realize that there were no mechanisms or opportunities for new thinking and learning to be shared or legitimately considered at a systems level. They felt blocked.

We needed a much broader and more inclusive conversations. The emerging question for the ProD committee became, "How do we build a district framework for discussion that is open, explorative and ensures all contributions are valued and respected?"

We begin with an Appreciative Inquiry approach for its simplicity of design and its proven track record in the field. AI is a model of community building with a focus on assets development and is built on the following principles:

- When people talk to one another about things that personally matter sense of community develops.
- Enthusiasm is heightened when the focus is on what a group or individual does well.
- Genuine inclusion promotes a mindset that connects individual thinking to the whole.
- Simultaneous change has the capacity to quickly move communities from ordinary to extraordinary.
- Cultural wisdom is socially constructed and democratically mobilized

Once again there to support this work through a Special Project Grant. We used the funds for facilitator training and committee release time. We felt that facilitator training was critically important to the sustainability of any framework we established. Inclusive models of collaboration are contingent on a new set of skills. Skills that encouraged open and honest dialogue that is not positional or hierarchical in nature. Facilitators were introduced to a variety of social development models and learned about strategic planning, setting time lines, establishing accountability

procedures and the authentic evaluation of both process and outcomes. For a district with less than 100 FTE's, ten trained facilitators represented a significant field of influence. Every school in the district had a colleague on staff able to support the development of more inclusive models. This critical mass of skilled facilitators meant we could theoretically go to scale as a simultaneous experience.

On the district ProD day we gathered everyone working in the school district under one roof for four hours of facilitated discussions following a four stage Appreciation Inquiry.

During phase one of the AI process participants were asked to interview one another about a time when they were part of a collaborative project that led to an exceptionally positive outcome. The telling of a personal story in the AI tradition generates a sense of belonging, cohesion and purpose. Participants were guided by questions that helped expose the 'high point' elements that made their experience exceptional.

In phase two the critical elements of these exceptional experiences were sorted and organized to reveal four cluster areas of importance: shared decision making, shared resources, communication and community building. It became evident that if we wanted our collaborative work to be exceptional these were the areas we must give our attention to.

In the weeks following the Appreciative Inquiry four sub committees were struck to address these four critical areas. The committees were made up of a balance of teacher, support staff, administrator and trustee representation.

The initial task of the committee was to define collaboration. We asked participants to read and discuss an article that defined collaboration on a continuum from simply dividing tasks among a group at one end to a full ideological shift in relationship at all organizational levels at the other. It was critical that we understood the parameters of our task. The definition of collaboration that we settled on was:

Collaboration is a process of shared decision-making in which all parties constructively explore different perspectives and develop a joint strategy for action. Collaboration is built on common ground, is organic in nature and contributes to shared ownership, trust, respect and understanding.

Another important role for committee members was to ensure that ideas and input were channeled from their constituency groups to the committee and that that work of the committee went back to the constituency groups in a continuous feedback loop. The goal was to ensure that all voices were heard and legitimately included as part of an ongoing process

Over the course of several weeks each committee met and produced an inventory of possible initiatives in each of the four critical areas (shared decision making, shared resources, communication and community building). The initiatives were considered through a sieve of viability and eventually broken down into three categories: those that had full support from all groups and were ready for immediate implementation, those that were more complex and needed additional discussion and those that were viable but relegated to future plans.

The initiatives were presented to the district as a whole and participation in the design and implementation of specific action plans was solicited.

The implementation of category one initiatives was relatively simple. For the most part the ideas were of little consequence to the structures of authority. They were easy to agree on and ensured a good outcome as we built a culture of trust. This stage also gave us the opportunity to build collaborative skill while the stakes were relatively low.

Now to the real work.

The next stage of committee work will address the more complex and potentially divisive issues: those that transcend boundaries and push against traditional models of management? It will be a test of intention and commitment with much higher stakes. Movement on these issues will not be easy. It will require a leap of faith as participants let go of their defined role and engage in a discussion as a shoulder-to-shoulder exercise. We only have to look as far as the recent teacher job action to know that current practices in public education have outlived their usefulness. A collaborative model that is built on the belief that educational practices that are sustainable in economic, environmental, cultural and human terms must gather the best of our collective thinking.

This work has great promise but is still in its infancy. The process and model we used are not meant to be recommendations. They are beginning points of understanding and exploration toward a new and potentially transformed reality.

**The simplest and most powerful investment any member of a community
can make is to begin talking with others as though it matters.
-W. Greiger**