

DOUGLAS FISHER NANCY FREY JOHN ALMARODE



STUDENT LEARNING COMMUNITIES

*A Springboard for Academic and
Social-Emotional Development*

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Why Student Learning Communities Matter

What teacher hasn't experienced group work gone bad?

We all know that we're supposed to have students collaborate with one another, but this practice is so often fraught with problems. One student does all of the work while others observe or, worse, disengage. Groups divide and conquer the task, and members don't ever interact with one another. Students talk about whatever they want when the teacher is not nearby and, consequently, do not finish the task. What starts as fun interaction devolves into a chaotic carnival disconnected from learning objectives. The task is so easy, or so difficult, that students are so bored or so frustrated that they simply don't do it. Every one of these situations may be familiar to you from past efforts to create opportunities for students to learn with and from one another. And if you've ever designed a group project gone awry, you're probably nodding in agreement right now.

Yes, the promise of student-to-student collaboration is often at odds with what actually goes on in our classrooms. Maybe the following experience, described by mathematics teacher Grace Coates (2005), is familiar to you as well?

Where I had imagined cooperative dialogue, there was bickering and arguing over materials. Where I had envisioned smiles, many students wore sullen looks. A few wore triumphant smiles as they managed to take over the work or materials. Where I had hoped for thoughtful curiosity,

there were pleading looks saying, “What do I do?” I was so disappointed by these results and my inability to change things in a way that would get my students working productively. (p. 11)

What was missing in Coates’s classroom, and what is often missing in group work, are not just the principles that build community and preserve focus but also the skills that allow students to benefit from the experience. Coates admits that she originally believed just putting students in groups would result in better learning. She came to realize more was required. Her students needed to learn how to communicate with one another over a meaningful task. They needed to know what success looked like and how to support each other in the pursuit and attainment of that success.

Instead of assuming that the group work students are doing is good enough, instead of hoping that collaboration will be its own reward, and instead of holding our breath every time group work starts in the hope that it will be productive, what if teachers structured that work more intentionally and purposefully? What if we equipped students with the skills and conditions they need to learn in a way that is truly collective and does make them “smarter together” than they would be as individuals?

The learning process requires the active involvement of the learner (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000). Decades ago, education was largely focused on acquisition of knowledge, with little consideration given to what went on in the minds of learners. The cognitive sciences and the emergence of awareness of *metacognition* (thinking about one’s thinking) have since helped teachers divine how students are processing and manipulating information. Increasingly, our aim is not for students to simply recall and recognize information; these are entry points, not destinations. Our goals for students, the destinations we set and endeavor to help them reach, include cognitive learning outcomes, conceptual understanding, creative problem solving, the development of communication skills, and social-emotional outcomes. In the end, *outcomes* today are measured in terms of transfer of learning—that is, the ability to apply knowledge in new situations to meet new challenges (Bransford et al., 2000).

Student learning communities (SLCs) are a way to recalibrate “group work” to transcend the format’s traditional limitations and pursue these essential modern outcomes. It’s a model dependent on the active involvement of each member of a learning team and designed to combine the skills and insights of each member in a way that allows all members to learn deeply and collectively.

In the spring of 2020, when distance learning came to dominate teachers' lives, many of us became newly cognizant of just how important it is for students to learn with and from one another. Yes, collaboration had long been identified as a "21st century learning skill" necessary for "the workforce of the future"; two decades into the century, it seems the future really has arrived. It means working from home instead of classrooms and offices. It means connecting with, solving problems with, and learning from others virtually instead of in person. We have also seen how the physical separation of students from their peers leaves many feeling isolated. We have recognized the toll it takes on them (and on us, their teachers). As a result, we believe it is crucial to prioritize ways for students to interact meaningfully in virtual environments in order to mitigate some of these effects. And while the setting may be different in a physically distanced classroom space or an online learning platform, the principles of how people learn together are the same.

As an accompaniment to this book, we have created an additional resource designed to further deep collective learning in virtual environments. It is available as a free download at www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/books/SLCVirtual.

The Principles of Learning Communities

The idea of collective learning—of leveraging collective wisdom to promote the growth of the group *as* a group *and* as individuals—is not new to teachers. It's perhaps most familiar as the aim of professional learning communities (PLCs), educator networks that emerged as a response to the often-isolated nature of classroom teaching. We recognized there was an urgent problem with "business as usual" in schools: closed classroom doors that left many practitioners teaching inside of a bubble . . . each of us left to our own devices to design, develop, and implement instruction and interpret assessment results. Why would teachers, as professionals, not want to pool our collective expertise and work collaboratively to advance our skills and improve our students' learning?

The PLC approach also acknowledges, and is guided by, another reality: teachers are not sitting around with an abundance of spare time. We need assurance that the hours devoted to interacting with peers are worthwhile—that they are an investment that will yield tangible benefits for ourselves, our colleagues, and our students.

Accordingly, successful PLCs, like all successful collaborative learning arrangements, are guided by a collective agreement to pursue useful goals in

an organized way. This helps avoid the problem of “collaboration for the sake of collaboration” and keeps the work focused. In other words, just because there’s a round table doesn’t make the people sitting there a learning community. Certain conditions must be present. Over the years, educators have learned that

- PLCs are a way to connect teachers with purpose and success—a way to acquire and hone skills and achieve meaningful and rewarding outcomes.
- PLCs activate collective skills and wisdom, and they are characterized by structures that allow teachers to help one another develop expertise and abilities.

What does it take to transform a group of individuals into a learning community? When Shirley Hord (2004) explored the conditions that facilitate collaborative learning in PLCs composed of teacher teams, she identified six critical factors:

1. Structural conditions that provide a framework for collaboration and the resources to engage in the collaborative work;
2. The fostering, nurturing, and sustaining of productive and professional relationships among members of the collaborative team;
3. The existence of shared values and purpose that motivate individual members to invest in the work of the collaborative team;
4. The intentional leveraging of the collective expertise;
5. All members working to enhance one another’s individual efficacy and credibility; and
6. All members leveraging their individual strengths to share leadership responsibilities.

The six elements that make collaborative learning transformative for teams of teachers—the components that transform them from “a group of people working together” into “a learning community”—have the potential to do the same for groups of students.

Think of your own practice, your own students. As you strive to have them engage one another in their learning, you must ensure that they have the skills and dispositions to be successful. This requires you to approach collective learning through the natural progression of gradually releasing responsibility

for the work to them. For example, if your learners are to foster shared agreements of success among members of their group, you must first model and engage them in the processes of goal setting, linking individual goals to group goals, and progress monitoring. If your learners are to leverage the support of their peers to amplify learning, you must first model and engage them in effective feedback. It's through this intentional design and implementation of collaborative learning that any teacher can set the stage for learners to engage in SLCs.

Consider what makes for a successful professional learning community—the combination of structures, objectives, priorities, and operations. As illustrated in Figure 1.1, there is considerable overlap between what a PLC needs to function well and the conditions that allow for the kind of deep collective classroom-based learning pursued in student learning communities. Just like a PLC, if an SLC is to thrive, it must engage in a cycle of inquiry. And as in a PLC, sustaining this cycle of inquiry requires SLC members to develop the skills and dispositions necessary to take an active role in their own learning process. For that, they need their teacher's guidance and support.

FIGURE 1.1

The Parallel Conditions for Successful PLCs and SLCs

PLCs need	SLCs need
Structural conditions that provide a framework for collaboration and the resources to engage in the collaborative work	Experiences and tasks that encourage student dialogue
Relationships among team members that are respectful, nurturing, and productive	Supportive relational conditions that empower learning
Shared values and purpose that motivate individual members to invest in the work of the team	Shared agreements about success
Intentional collective learning that builds skills, expertise, and efficacy	Intentional collective learning that builds cognitive and metacognitive skills
Intentional leveraging of staff supports to enhance overall efficacy	Intentional leveraging of peer supports that amplify learning
Intentional work to capitalize on each member's strengths and share leadership responsibilities	The activation of leadership skills students need to succeed—alone and together

Student Learning Communities as the Means to Improve Student Learning

Fortunately, the majority of teachers who have seen collaborative learning flop in the classroom have also seen it succeed. We have witnessed students working together in ways that meet the “learning community” standard, leveraging their collective knowledge, skills, and understandings and consolidating what they know and can do to go further and deeper together than they could have alone.

Consider the example of students in a 5th grade social studies class studying traditional Native American societies and foodways. One of the collaborative learning tasks involved researching food sources and the influence of geography on supply. Each group of learners had a different food source to investigate, and each member of the group had to locate information to share with the group. Each learner had access to digital and print resources, and part of their individual task was to evaluate the credibility of each resource (and some were questionable). Then, as a group, they worked to reach consensus about the information to share out with the rest of class. Each member presented his or her findings, then together they generated a group summary of their assigned food source. Here’s an excerpted paragraph from the composition written by the “acorns” group:

Collecting acorns is a complicated task. You need to be able to identify the good from the bad. When you look for acorns in the fall, when they are ripe, they may fall to the ground. When you start to collect them, be sure to collect the ones *with* their “caps.” If you collect the ones without caps, they might have insect larvae inside. This is mainly because an acorn without a cap has probably fallen due to the worm’s activity in the acorn, causing it to shake loose of the cap. You also have to look carefully at the ones you collect for holes in the acorn’s shell, as these will also indicate the presence of a foul acorn.

When asked about their processes, the students explained that one member’s contribution shaped the whole group’s thinking. “Jonathan was telling us about what he had found out about poisonous plants in his scout troop, and it got all of us thinking about what could be dangerous in the food supply,” said Claire. “That’s what changed our investigation,” added Spencer.

The paragraph they wrote makes sense and conveys accurate and interesting information. But, more important, it illustrates how these learners moved beyond being just another group of students working together on a

project—gathering information, consolidating it, presenting it, checking off the steps to task completion. It’s a representation of the everyday transformational work of a community of learners, sparked by the new information and perspective introduced by one of its members.

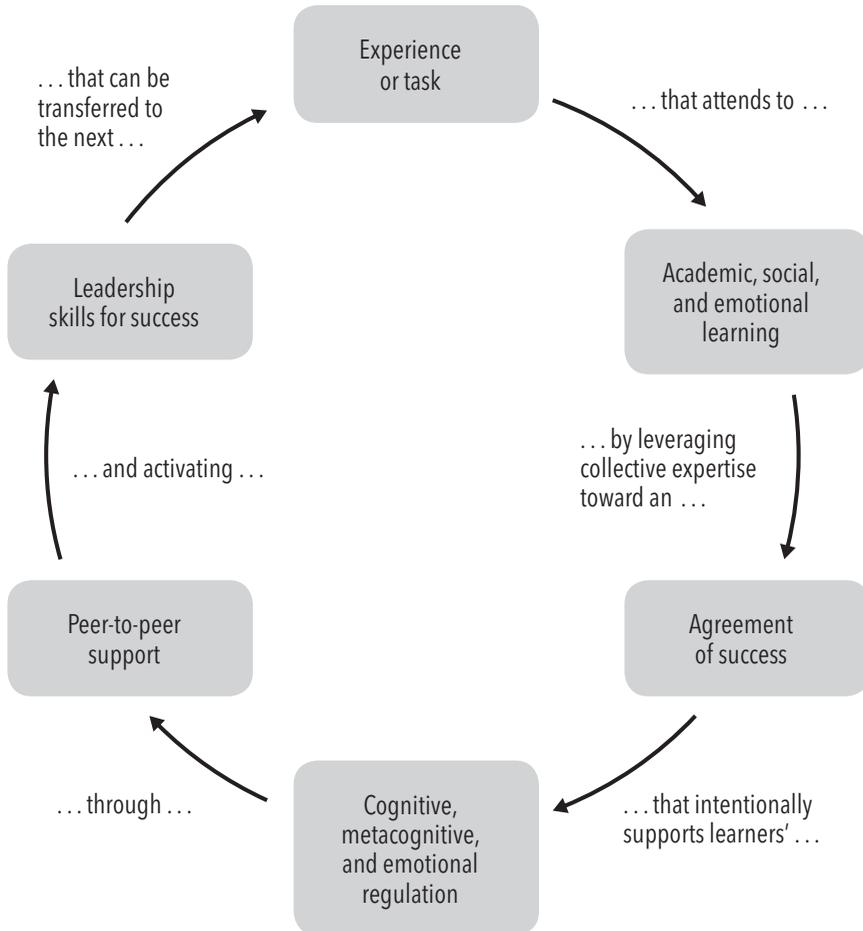
There are also other elements that mark this collaboration as student learning rather than just a group of students working together. The members of the group demonstrated a social sensitivity and willingness to entertain Jonathan’s somewhat tangential knowledge. They had to make some rapid decisions about whether the possible shift in direction would be consistent with their shared agreement of success. At some point, leaders emerged from within this community to allocate resources in order to bring the task to completion. Pretty impressive for 10-year-olds. And yet, you can likely identify many similar examples from your own students, not every time they work in groups, perhaps, but at least often enough for you to see what group learning could be, and at least often enough that you keep chasing those outcomes with new group assignments.

The point is, we know student collaboration can be a springboard to better learning—not just academic learning, but social and emotional learning too. And while this exchange took place in a face-to-face classroom, it just as easily could have occurred in a virtual one, with the addition of some collaborative tools allowing students to talk to and write with one another. How can we ensure this happens reliably for all of our students, rather than just some of the time for some of our students? By attending to the six elements that transform a group of students into a student learning community.

An SLC is achieved by design and through effort, not by luck. In order for students to engage in the collaborative learning process (see Figure 1.2), we, their teachers, need to provide them with the necessary conditions, tools, and supports. That means

- Designing **experiences and tasks** that invigorate learning through academic discourse;
- Attending to **academic, social, and emotional learning**;
- Fostering **shared agreements of individual and group success**;
- Using thoughtful teaming practices to build **cognitive, metacognitive, and emotional regulation** skills;
- Leveraging **peer supports** to amplify learning; and
- Activating all students’ **leadership skills** in order to enhance their ability to succeed—alone *and* together.

FIGURE 1.2

The Process of Learning in Student Learning Communities

Now, what we intend to do collaboratively with you in the pages ahead is explore each of the six conditions necessary for successful SLCs—which also happen to be the six conditions necessary for effective collaborative learning. It's essential to understand these conditions in order to create them, and a key understanding is that creating them is not a one-time thing. For students to develop and strengthen the skills they need to engage in deep collective learning, they need teachers to model these skills and provide ongoing support.

In sum, this book offers an in-depth look at how to maximize students' academic, social, and emotional development through the practice of student learning communities. There are three takeaways that will unfold in the chapters ahead:

1. **SLCs are more than just a different way of doing group work.** They are a means to foster and sustain students' ability to take ownership of their own learning.
2. **SLCs require teachers to be intentional about engaging students in collaboration.** Knowing when to employ this approach is part of knowing how to employ it.
3. **The academic, social, and emotional skills necessary for successful SLCs must be taught,** ideally through the gradual release of responsibility framework. This ultimately enhances collective learning by leveraging the collective efficacy of the community.

Moving Forward . . .

As teachers, we know our purpose. We want our students to be meet specific milestones, and we want them to become better learners. We want to help them achieve cognitive learning outcomes, develop conceptual understanding, solve problems creatively, and communicate effectively. Research confirms that well-planned collaborative learning experiences can achieve these goals (Cohen & Lotan, 2014). When the elements that make collaborative learning transformative are present in our classrooms, be they “brick” or “click,” we see the improved social and emotional learning outcomes, as well as improved behavioral engagement (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). Finally, leveraging the collective wisdom of all learners means embracing diversity; in that way, SLCs are another pathway for ensuring equity of access and opportunity for all learners.

Let's get started!

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About the Authors



Douglas Fisher is a professor of educational leadership at San Diego State University and a teacher leader at Health Sciences High & Middle College. He is a member of the California Reading Hall of Fame and is the recipient of a Celebrate Literacy Award from the International Reading Association, the Farmer Award for Excellence in Writing from the National Council of Teachers of English, and the Christa McAuliffe Award for Excellence in Teacher Education from the American Association of State Colleges and Universities. Fisher has published numerous articles on improving student achievement, and his books include *The Purposeful Classroom*, *Building Equity*, and *Intentional and Targeted Teaching*. He can be reached at dfisher@sdsu.edu.



Nancy Frey is a professor of educational leadership at San Diego State University and a teacher leader at Health Sciences High & Middle College. Before joining the university faculty, Frey was a special education teacher in the Broward County (Florida) Public Schools, where she taught students at the elementary and middle school levels. She later worked for the Florida Department of Education on a statewide project for supporting students with disabilities in a general education curriculum. Frey is a recipient of the Christa McAuliffe Award for Excellence in Teacher Education from the American Association of

State Colleges and Universities and the Early Career Award from the Literacy Research Association. Her research interests include reading and literacy, assessment, intervention, and curriculum design. She has published many articles and books on literacy and instruction, including *Better Learning Through Structured Teaching*, *How to Reach the Hard to Teach*, and *All Learning Is Social and Emotional*. She can be reached at nfrey@sdsu.edu.



John Almarode is an associate professor of education and the Executive Director of Teaching and Learning in the College of Education at James Madison University. Almarode began his career in Augusta County, Virginia, teaching high school mathematics and science. Now, he works with preservice teachers and devotes time to collaborating with in-service teachers in classrooms and schools across the globe. Almarode and his colleagues have presented their work to the United States Congress, the United States Department of Education, and the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy. He has authored multiple articles, reports, book chapters, and more than a dozen books on effective teaching and learning in today's schools and classrooms. He can be reached at almarojt@jmu.edu.

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