Learning in Communities

I was invited to observe in the video production class of Pat Phillips, an instructor at the Career and Technical Education School in Bismarck, North Dakota. During a pre-conference and observation with Pat, I was reminded of an earlier blog I had written on studio learning. Pat and his students work and learn as a community.

A sign on Pat's wall caught my attention and started me thinking about learning communities.

My first reaction was to recall a somewhat similar message I had often seen in elementary classrooms, *"Ask three before me."* (See video.) But as I considered the studio approach, I pondered a deeper, sophisticated message to the poster.

Taking a lead from the list, an internet search took me to a paper titled, **Learning Communities in Classrooms: A Reconceptualization of Educational Practice,** by Katerine Bielaczyc and Allan Collins. The authors suggested that the defining quality of a learning community is a culture of learning, in which everyone is involved in a collective effort of understanding.

They list four characteristics such a culture must have:

(1) diversity of expertise among its members, who are valued for their contributions and given support to develop
(2) a shared objective of continually advancing the collective knowledge and skills
(3) an emphasis on learning how to learn
(4) mechanisms for sharing what is learned.

Students learn to synthesize multiple perspectives, to solve problems in a variety of ways, and to use each other's diverse knowledge and skills as resources to collaboratively solve problems and advance their understanding. The intent is for

members to come to respect and value differences within the community. If a learning community is presented with a problem, then the learning community can bring its collective knowledge to bear on the problem. It is not necessary that each member assimilate everything that the community knows, but each should know who within the community has relevant expertise to address any problem.

Let's revisit the four characteristics as they relate to teachers' learning communities:

(1) diversity of expertise among its members, who are valued for their contributions and given support to develop. (Critical that teachers really know each other to appreciate the talent and knowledge within the community.)

(2) a shared objective of continually advancing the collective knowledge and skills (Setting shared learning outcomes for students can help a PLC keep this focus.)

(3) an emphasis on learning how to learn (This differentiates PLCs from the traditional work of grade level teams and departments.)

(4) mechanisms for sharing what is learned. (Peer coaching observations and sharing of classroom video clips can increase sharing of learning.)

In an effective PLC, teachers share a common mission of maximizing student learning. Each member has a responsibility to develop their own skills and understanding as well as that of each other. New knowledge should fly through the organization positively impacting all students.

Pat's list for what to do when waiting for help can apply too for teachers in between PLC sessions. I see two keys: one is constantly sharing the opportunity for colleagues to join in building student success and the other keeping a continuous improvement mindset.