

# Cultures of Thinking Teacher Labs

## *Observing and Talking about the Creation Of Cultures Of Thinking In Our Classroom*

Lab learning enables colleagues to meet in small groups to observe, inquire, and reflect on teaching practices as they play out real-time in classrooms, creating collaborative action/study cycles. These observations and discussions differ from other forms of classroom observation in that they are not designed as feedback or coaching sessions on a lesson but as an opportunity to co-explore the complexities of teaching and learning with colleagues.

A Lab can vary in size from as small as 3-4 or as large as 20 if the space permits. Lab participants may consist of a small group of teachers from within the school or include teachers from visiting schools. The Lab itself consists of three phases: Pre-Observation Exploration, Observation, and Post-Observation Discussion.

**PRE-OBSERVATION EXPLORATION** sets the tone and focus for the day. The group spends time collectively grounding themselves in the focus of the lab. This might involve reading related research materials, exploring issues and questions related to the area of focus, setting up tools they will use during and after the observation, and understanding the context of the classroom instruction they will observe. The time together before entering into the classroom observation can result in deeper engagement, richer observation, and greater understanding for all participants.

**Focusing:** The Host Teacher inviting us into his or her classroom will have the opportunity to present a focus for our observation and subsequent discussion. Ideally this is shared with the group in advance so that they come to the session with some thoughts and questions in mind with regard to the area of focus. Some examples of how a host teacher might focus the observations are:

- ❖ The Host Teacher may nominate a couple of cultural forces (i.e., expectations, modeling, language, time, opportunities, routines, interactions, environment) on which you have been focusing or puzzling over for the group's focus.
  - *EXAMPLE: The Host Teacher may be working on the cultural force of interactions with the goal of encouraging greater discourse in her classroom and planned a lesson with this focus in mind. In the pre-observation time, the Observing Teachers might discuss a an article they read in advance about discourse and explore what they have learned collectively about effective strategies as well as challenges in promoting discourse.*
- ❖ The Host Teacher may identify a dispositional focus (e.g., curiosity, open-mindedness, independence, risk taking, etc.) for the group that represents something you have been trying to nurture among the students in your classroom.

- *EXAMPLE: The Host Teacher may be trying to foster greater independence among her students. In the pre-observation time, the Observing Teachers might discuss: What does independence look like in a thinking classroom? What are the challenges for students generally and at this grade level specifically? As the host teacher, you will also share how the lesson we are about to observe connects to the area of focus and any particular puzzles you might have?*
- ❖ The Host Teacher may identify a thinking focus (e.g., perspective taking, connection making, reasoning with evidence, building explanations, wondering, describing what's there, etc.) for the group. This might represent something you have been trying to nurture among the students in your classroom generally, or it may connect to your use of a particular thinking routine you are using in the lesson.
- *EXAMPLE: The Host Teacher might be interested in trying out a new routine and may have engaged in some pre-planning with the facilitator/coach to design and lesson using that routine. During the pre-observation time, the Observing Teachers discuss the routine collectively to better understand its' design and intent. They identify what kinds of things they might expect from students in the upcoming lesson and how and when to push students to get the best thinking from them.*

**CLASSROOM OBSERVATION** is the heart of Lab experience. During this phase the host teacher focuses on the instruction of his/her students, the students engage in the tasks at hand while ignoring the observers, and the observing teachers carefully move about at the periphery of the classroom activity. However, there are possibilities for adaptation in the roles of the lab participants. Depending on the purpose of the lab, a host teacher might invite the observing teachers to interact with the students or to try out a strategy the group studied in pre-observation.

**POST OBSERVATION DISCUSSION** begins with the observing teachers silently developing their notes from the observation. This is time to gather our thoughts related to our “noticings” from the observation as they related to the area of focus. The host teacher joins the group after handing off classroom responsibilities.

We use a version of See/Notice-Think-Wonder for our sharing and discussion. Our goal is to use our observations as a springboard for better understanding the area of focus. :

- ❖ What's something you noticed in the classroom that relates to the area of focus?
- ❖ How do you think that relates to our area of focus?
- ❖ What questions does that raise for you?