

Chapter 4

How We Do the Work Matters: Turning Beliefs Into Action

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ABSTRACT

How we spend our valuable professional learning time together says much about what we value. When designing agendas for intentional learning communities (ILCs), centering our core beliefs creates transformative learning experiences. Being intentional about what we believe builds learning communities that center beliefs in their work. The Freirean concept of praxis reminds us that convening is not enough: community members must intentionally shape their environment to “reflect upon their reality and so transform it through further action and critical reflection.” This chapter will outline how the authors continue to evolve their practice and turn beliefs into action in their Rowland Foundation ILCs. Their transparent meeting agendas, which explicitly connect purpose and practice, have helped strengthen metacognition and reflection in the ILC work. ILC meetings predicated on practice—with time built in to debrief along the way—have helped them reflect on how they do the work and develop their skills as a learning community.

INTRODUCTION

Agendas are moral documents. They identify what we prioritize, value, and invest in, either intentionally or unintentionally. Centering our core beliefs when designing agendas for Intentional Learning Communities (ILCs) creates transformative learning experiences and builds strong cultures. How we spend our valuable professional learning time together says a lot about what we value. Being explicit about shared beliefs increases our collective capacity to transform learning and build strong school cultures beyond the ILC.

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The return to in-person meetings after the COVID pandemic has raised questions about how we use the precious resources of time, energy, and attention. The “new normal” of synchronous and asynchronous work, supported by hybrid, remote, and in-person meetings, has forced a reexamination of how we spend our time together. In this new reality, purposeful agendas make clear the intentions behind meeting design, agenda planning, and values. When meeting planners are transparent about intention, process, and cultivating interdependence, there is a noticeable shift in the learning community’s culture and climate (Wenger, 2010). Explicitly connecting and regularly examining beliefs and actions strengthens ILCs. For Paolo Freire (2000), “Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (p. 72).

In the same spirit, our ILC work evolves as we question it, reflect together, iterate, and try, try again. In the chapter that follows, we will not present an ILC magic recipe or silver bullet, but rather share an inquiry process that is still ongoing for us. The ideas presented below are dimensions of the work that have given us better questions and more robust schema to apply to our ILC work. After further unpacking the concept of praxis, we introduce the particular context for this work: Rowland Foundation ILCs, where our ongoing practice and reflection has led to the emergence of an approach that tends toward centering values counter to those of the dominant culture. We offer the rationale for these shifts and concrete examples from our ongoing practice.

NAMING OUR TEACHERS, MENTORS, AND CO-LEARNERS

This work grows from deep roots, and we’d like to share gratitude and appreciation for some of the people and organizations that have taught and nurtured us as practitioners and collaborators. At the risk of resembling the “ad nauseum acknowledgers” that Ross Gay has described (2023, 73), we want to identify some of the important contributions of our many teachers, mentors, and co-learners.

Our work is grounded in School Reform Initiative (SRI) Protocols and many opportunities to learn with and from educators at the SRI’s Fall and Winter Meetings and regional gatherings. We are forever grateful to Gene Thompson Grove, Frances Hensley, Daniel Baron, Patricia Norman, Kari Thierer, Kevin Fahey, Beth Graham, and so many others for providing models, asking questions, and offering paradigm-shifting insights. Winter and Fall meetings also provided the opportunity to work alongside and learn from co-facilitators like Deirdre-Sharkey Williams, Kelly Brown, and Barbara Mullen.

Gene Thompson Grove’s 2015 course *Designing Adult Learning* has contributed to our understanding of professional learning design, agenda development, and deeply responsive facilitation. Both the structure of and the content in the agendas we use here emerged in large part from Gene’s examples.

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