Chapter 4
How We Do the Work Matters:
Turning Beliefs Into Action

Jeanie M. Phillips
Great Schools Partnership, USA

Michael S. Martin
The Rowland Foundation, USA

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.

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.

We owe a debt of gratitude to our colleagues and friends at the Rowland Foundation, the Tarrant Institute for Innovative Education at the University of Vermont, and Great Schools Partnership. Ongoing participation in Courage and Renewal Cohorts, based on the work of Parker Palmer and facilitated by WholeHeart, Inc., continues to bring us new learning. Each of these organizations provided space for us to develop and refine our work in a *community of practice (Wenger, 2010).*

We are deeply grateful for the numerous teachers, students, administrators, support staff, school board members, and community members that we had the honor of working with in Champlain Valley Union High School, Montpelier Public Schools, South Burlington School District, and Two Rivers Supervisory Union. We are incredibly fortunate to have worked for years with friends and colleagues

Related Content

Socio-Organizational Structure and the Implications Between Institutional Change and Institutionalization
José G. Vargas-Hernandez, Carlos Alberto Rodriguez-Maillardand Omar C. Vargas-González (2024). *Promoting Crisis Management and Creative Problem-Solving Skills in Educational Leadership (pp. 99-124).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/socio-organizational-structure-and-the-implications-between-institutional-change-and-institutionalization/337163

Promoting Collaboration in Teaching and Learning: A Data-Centric Approach
Olalekan Rafiu Ayodele-Oja (2024). *Handbook of Research on Critical Issues and Global Trends in International Education (pp. 212-237).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/promoting-collaboration-in-teaching-and-learning/334319

A Global American University: How Midwest University Exports Education to the Periphery
Heather Sweeneyand Edwin Nii Bonney (2021). *People-Centered Approaches Toward the Internationalization of Higher Education (pp. 254-267).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/a-global-american-university/259526

Fostering Culturally Inclusive Family and School Collaboration Within the African American "Community"
York Williams (2020). *Fostering Collaborations Between African American Communities and Educational Institutions (pp. 173-192).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/fostering-culturally-inclusive-family-and-school-collaboration-within-the-african-american-community/244863

Creating Reflective Peer Leaders: Developing Doctoral Student Reflective Practice Through Instruction, Mentoring, and Community
Abigail Winterand Deanna Grant-Smith (2023). *Best Practices and Programmatic Approaches for Mentoring Educational Leaders (pp. 188-208).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/creating-reflective-peer-leaders/319007