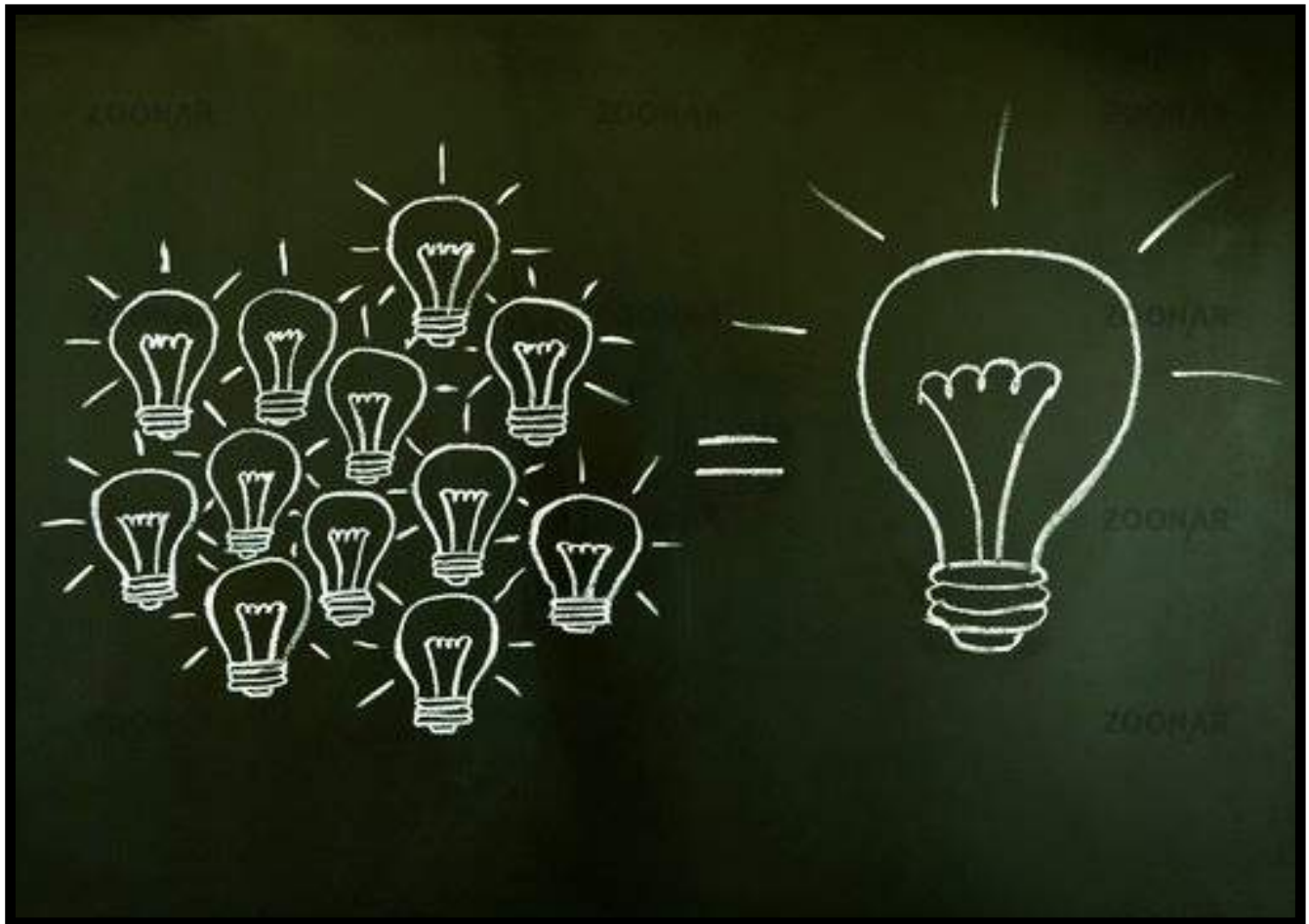

Promoting Successful Collaborative Partnerships Through Systems Thinking and Design

Identifying Individual/ Group Priorities, Tensions and Solutions to Potential Conflicts

Tatum Omari - April 26, 2014



Introduction

Embarking on the journey of building a collaborative partnership with a colleague can be one of the most exhilarating and at times challenging pursuits in the professional workplace. The ability to collaborate effectively can make or break most endeavors and it is imperative to set collaborative teams up for success by helping them to identify the component parts, people and priorities that will come together to form their specific working system. When developing a collaborative relationship, it is important to realize that each team member comes with previous experiences, strengths, growing edges, personality types and communications preferences. Finding out these details organically, through experience, can work for some. For others, it can cause a degree of dissonance and confusion that is potentially unnecessary and can be avoided if those team members are given the chance to explore their priorities and working styles, together. To facilitate this, their first collaborative endeavor could have them exploring their partnership as a working system. By engaging in this practice, they can gain a greater understanding of their developing collaborative system and identify potential dissonance. They could then create a playbook for how they will handle that dissonance when it surfaces. When they encounter that dissonance in practice they can then face it head on because they anticipated and prepared for it well ahead of time. At this time, they can also evaluate the potential solutions they generated after they have been put to the test and further refine their working system.

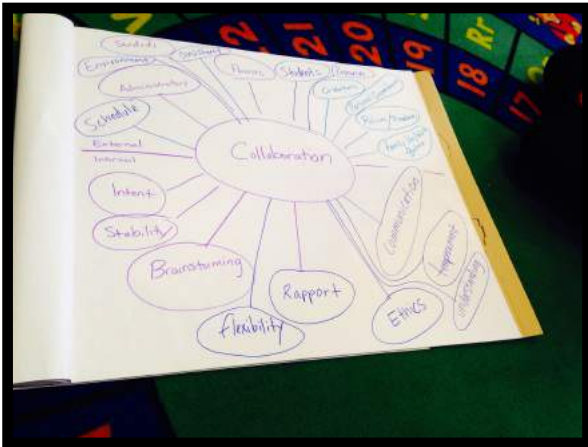
Giving our educators the support they need to engage in and prepare for the demands of collaborative practice can provide them with a road map that will guide them through rocky encounters and help them find functional middle ground and maybe even a bit of collaborative bliss!

Activity: Mapping the System of Collaboration

Identifying the Parts

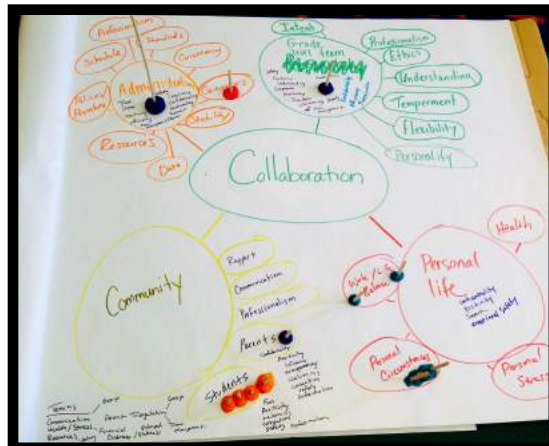
In this first part of the activity, I asked my colleagues to brainstorm and map the component parts of their system. This can include but is most certainly not limited to considerations such as administration, parent community, state standards and assessments, individual interests, communication styles, personality types etc. I asked them to be creative and think deeply

about what would influence our collaborative partnership. The more influences we identified, the better the picture we began to create regarding what our collaborative partnership would look like in practice. Through this exercise we found that mapping this system needed to take place in two parts. Our first initial brainstorm felt like it needed much more refinement so we took a look at the ideas we had generated and looked for connections. From the connections we made, we were able to create a new map that had four main areas: Administration, Community, Personality and Personal Life



Identifying the People

After we identified the key parts we believed existed within our collaborative system and also thought about how these parts would influence our work, we identified the specific people that were present within those parts. (ex. Administration was one of the circles in our systems map and we identified our directors as the key people that existed in that part of the system.) We then used small cut dowels and attached them with play dough to each part of the system where we were able to identify key people as players within our system. We ended up cutting them to different lengths to represent how much power we felt they would assert over our collaborative process.



Identifying the Priorities

This is where things really got interesting. With all our key people identified we now had the task of identifying the values and priorities that each of these players might bring to our system. For our administrator, we had the task of assuming which values would matter most to her. After we listed them, we also checked our assumptions directly with her by asking her what they were. Here are the values we associated with each of the different people we identified in our system:

Administration: Trust, Data, Positivity, Time Management, Power, Compliance, Functionality and Respect

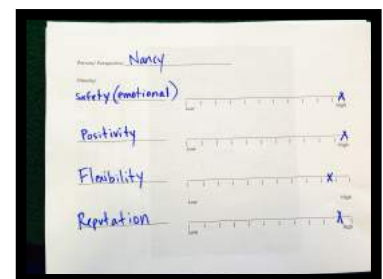
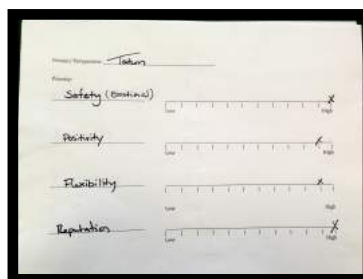
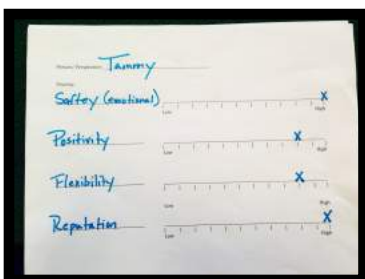
Parents: Positivity, Confidentiality, Influence, Transparency, Connection/Welcomed Feeling, Safety and Professionalism

Grade Level Team: Confidentiality, Positivity, Support, Emotional Safety and Flexibility, Understanding, Compromise, Freedom, Honesty, Professionalism, Time Management and Presentation.

Thinking about all of these different perspectives gave us an incredible amount of insight. We also made a few adjustments to our main subject areas. We decided that “Personality” would be replaced by “Grade Level Team” as it represented us better as a cohesive unit and the “Personal Life” category could serve to represent us as individuals.

Identifying the Tensions

Now is where we each got to pick our most important values. We tried to keep it to only four so we could really focus in and think about and explore why these values were so important to us. Each member of our team picked one value and we also made a guess at what our administrator would pick. After the values were identified we each rated the importance of each on a scale from high to low. This is a great opportunity to identify differences in priorities and perspectives and a great chance to identify tensions that might have come up for our team. During this specific exercise we were able to confirm something we already kind of knew. We have very similar priorities! My main partner teacher and I even chuckled a bit at how we rated the values in exactly the same way and our associate teacher only rated one thing differently! It was then we realized just how great of a team we were!



Developing a Solutions Playbook

Alas, we recognized that all teams eventually have some tensions that arise, so we did our best to think about the values we had identified and what those potential tensions might actually look like. The tensions we anticipated were: gossip, parent triangulation, health/stress and resources. After identifying and making a list of the possible tensions, we took a moment to think quietly to ourselves about what strategies/solutions could help us through these tense moments. We then made a comic strip and chose one tension and how it might play out for us individually in the future. The comic strip consisted of four frames that included the following instructions:

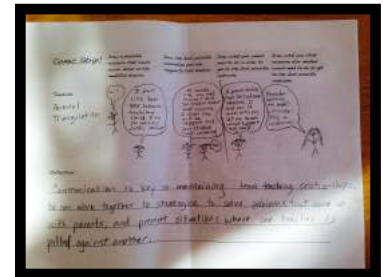
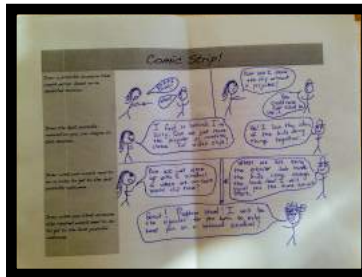
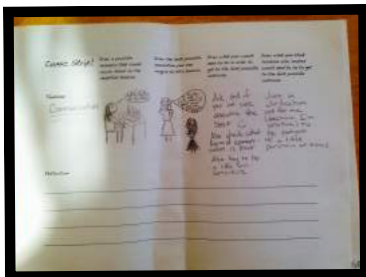
Frame 1: Draw a possible scenario that could occur based on an identified tension.

Frame 2: Draw the best possible resolution you can imagine to this tension.

Frame 3: Draw what you would need to do in order to accomplish the best possible outcome.

Frame 4: Draw what you think someone else involved would need to do to accomplish the best possible outcome.

This turned out to be a fabulous activity. When we all came together to share, it came out that many of the situations we had depicted had actually happened to us. Exploring these situations gave us a lot of hope for a bright future because we would have some solid strategies and guidance for how to deal with those situations when they came up again. We were also able to learn from each other's experiences and the insight we brought with us regarding how to deal with them.



Studio Habits of Mind

Using the Studio Habits can serve as a wonderful tool to help us remember the dispositions we are hoping to develop through our work as educators. I include them here because I have found that my most important work as an educator has not only been to impart and teach these dispositions to students, but to strive to develop these dispositions within myself both personally and professionally. The subject of collaboration could be used as a wonderful

entry point into any of the eight habits. It allows such a great means of exploration that I had a hard time narrowing down which were the most important. For this particular exercise I felt like the skills of observation, reflection and understanding your community were especially useful. These definitions for all of the habits can also found on Alameda County's "Art is Education" Website (<http://www.artiseducation.org/sites/default/files/shom.pdf>). I have included the definition for the habits of focus below and adapted them for this particular context.

Observe: Learning to attend to contexts more closely than ordinary "looking" requires, and thereby to see things that otherwise might not be seen.

Reflect: Learning to think and talk with others about an aspect of one's work or working process, and, learning to judge one's own work and working process and the work of others.

Understand Arts Community: Learning to interact as an educator with other educators and within the broader society.

Reflecting On Our Experiences:

This was by far the most important part of this exercise. We had two guiding questions: What did we find particularly useful about this process? What did we learn about our team and ourselves?

"I learned that my work environment is truly like being part of a family. All of the aspects that you experience being part of a family (good, bad, conflicts, resolutions, children and health) all play a part in the family experience and balance. If you don't have a good morning with your family then it carries into work and vice versa, if you have a bad day at school you can carry it home very easily too. As we continue to collaborate my main goal is to stay positive as it's so important to all of us. I also liked the categorizing activity. When we needed to put things in categories it helped us to really see the big picture and what the really important big ideas and influences were." - Tammy

"I learned that approaching our colleagues with kindness, compassion and empathy are important parts of building work relationships. Carrying those elements into our communication also helps to support a healthy work environment. I also really liked the mapping because we were really inspired by each others ideas around what personally motivated us. It was interesting to find out what drives each person and what their values are" -Nancy

“I learned that sometimes my ideas about what’s important to another person can be totally spot on, and at other times totally off. This process was important for me so that I could check my assumptions and get to know my teaching partners in a real and meaningful way. I loved the brainstorming activity. This was my second time doing this activity and I surprised because we came up with very different categories for our map than the first one that I did with another teacher. This map was very specific to who we are how we work together.”

-Tatum