PASS THE CHOCOLATE
planning with teachers

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"We need chocolate," Areyanna, a second-grade teacher, proclaimed during one intensive planning meeting with her grade-level colleagues and the school librarian. As the school librarian, I always had a basket of chocolate on the table when teachers met to plan with me. I had learned the value of food from several of my mentors. Advertise food when you want teachers to join you after school to preview new books or get a quick technology update. Brew a pot of coffee every morning, and teachers will stop by for a quick chat that might lead to a collaborative lesson.

Food, in this case chocolate, had the effect of offering small gifts that helped sustain a community of practice—a team of teachers and a librarian—in planning together. A delicious finding in a year-long study of collaboration found the crinkle of candy wrappers in every meeting; often at a difficult point in the meeting, someone would inevitably ask that we "pass the chocolate."

What Planning Means to Teachers

These are among the small things that we do as school librarians to facilitate community and collaboration with teachers. We prepare for planning meetings with curriculum objectives, library materials, and chocolate. We consider the work of coming together to talk about curriculum objectives, unit plans, and student learning to be collaboration. For teachers, this collaboration is the work of planning what they will be teaching in the next few weeks. Teachers were concerned with "What are we doing on Monday?"

For teachers at an elementary school where I served as school librarian, grade-level or team planning was considered critical to the success of teaching and student learning. As we talked, teachers were filling out long-range planning maps and daily boxes in their individual plan books. In practice, their plan books were essential tools checked by principals and left for substitutes. A plan book broke the day into discrete boxes of time that structured the school day.

Often timeframes were dictated by administration: so many minutes of reading instruction, and so many of math. Some blocks were known as the "specialists' block" that teachers considered their "planning time," but those chunks of time were often usurped by other demands—either personal or administrative—and didn't always offer a common time to work with others at the same grade level.

In this school we were fortunate to have a monthly afternoon block of time for grade-level planning that included the school librarian and took place in the library where needed resources were often literally at arms' length from teachers as they planned for instruction.

What School Librarians Know about Planning

Planning is the practice that enables collaboration. Carol Brown (2004) found that one of the most important environmental factors related to successful teacher–librarian collaboration was regularly scheduled planning meetings. With all the discourse in school librarianship about collaboration, there is surprisingly little discussion of teacher planning.

For teachers, planning is the taken-for-granted work necessary for teaching. In their methods classes, pre-service teachers learn about planning lessons and disciplinary units of study. Linda Lachance Wolcott (1994) looked at the meaning of planning to classroom teachers as it impacted the school librarian. She found that teachers plan for a variety of reasons including a need to prepare for instruction and to satisfy administrator requirements that teachers prepare and submit written lesson plans.

Planning focuses on various increments of time, ranging from a single lesson to a day, a week, a grading term, and a school year. Teacher planning is a mental activity, nonlinear, and influenced by written curricula, textbooks, and other published materials. The latter finding that teachers rely on the materials at hand for planning suggests a role for the school librarian in the provision of resources to assist teachers in planning.

A Case Study of Planning

A case of planning between a school librarian and a team of second-grade teachers across a school year was a subject of my research. I was particularly interested in what planning sounded like—what kinds of talk teachers and the librarian engaged in to do the work of planning. School librarians hear a lot about collaboration, but we have few models of what it actually entails.
Accustomed to integrating 21st-century standards with content standards, school librarians are also able to make connections that cross content areas.

I was the school librarian at the time, and I recorded, transcribed, and analyzed eight collaborative planning meetings across an entire school year. Teachers were also interviewed at the middle and end of the year about their meanings of planning. Teachers placed a high value on this shared time. As Brittany, the novice teacher on the second-grade team said, “Planning together saved my life this first year.”

Analyzing the transcripts from that year of collaborative planning, I looked for patterns in the talk and found common activities that I labeled “orienting,” “coordinating,” “making connections,” “making sense,” and “drifting.” Each activity was present in every planning meeting and in all planning for instruction. The activities and suggestions for school librarians related to each are described below.

**Orienting**

Orienting is talk that brings the members of a planning team together. Questions such as “What do we need to plan today?” or statements such as “Okay, we have decided to use this book” are ways for team members to check in with each other, get started, summarize a decision, or move on to a new topic. Anyone on the team can initiate this activity, but, often, the school librarian can serve as an outsider to reflect back to a group, “I hear you saying you have decided...” or “What do we still need to do?” The activity of orienting took up little time but was key to facilitating decisions and moving forward.

This activity requires sensitivity to group process and careful listening for what team members are saying, as well as the ability to recognize when more discussion is needed or when the talk needs to be redirected back to a topic. Teachers in the case study valued the librarian for helping to keep them on track during planning.

**Coordinating**

In collaboration, coordinating is an essential activity that involves coordinating schedules to share resources including the school library and librarian. Today, teachers’ schedules are very prescriptive. Elementary schools have blocks for literacy, math, lunch, and resources or specialists, with little discretionary time during the school day. Even when the school librarian has a flexible schedule, teachers and the librarian still have to be creative to find common times for students to visit the library as a whole class, in small groups, or for individual browsing and checkout.

In this study, a decision was often made for the librarian to provide either the “teacher-directed reading” or the writing lesson within the teacher’s literacy block. Coordinating involves knowledge of each other’s schedules. School librarians can facilitate this activity by learning about classroom and grade-level schedules as well as about pacing guides.

**Making Connections**

Awareness of pacing guides, or what teachers are planning to teach when, is essential in promoting the activity of making connections. Armed with this knowledge, the school librarian can investigate curriculum goals and find connections with resources in a variety of formats throughout the school library and beyond. When these resources are brought to the table for planning, teachers can make connections and plans for including library materials and the librarian in instruction. As Wolcott (1994) suggested, teachers use what’s at hand when they plan.

Accustomed to integrating 21st-century standards with content standards, school librarians are also able to make connections that cross content areas. In planning a social studies or science lesson with teachers, a school librarian might ask what the writing or reading objectives are for the same timeframe and recommend texts to support more than one subject. Finally, when the school librarian is a member of every grade level’s planning or has membership on school-wide teams, he or she is in a position to make connections between grade levels or with school-wide activities or initiatives.

**Making Sense**

Making sense together best represents the value of collaboration. This is the activity in which team members probe each other’s thoughts to understand curriculum, pedagogy, and student learning and often find understandings that no one might discover alone.

Newcomers or outsiders have a particular contribution to make to this activity because they don’t possess insider knowledge.
or shared past experiences. The school librarian can leverage this "ignorance" to ask questions about the meaning of a curricular goal, how it has been taught by teachers in the past, or "What do we want students to know at the end of this and how will we know they know it?"

Often team members may take for granted that they have the same ideas, and these questions uncover unexamined assumptions and bring forth best practices. Key questions about assessment, learning objectives and strategies, and students’ prior knowledge and interests emerge in this activity and lead to new ideas, resources, or strategies.

Drifting

The talk about chocolate that opened this article is an example of the activity of drifting. Drifting might be considered off task, but it represents one of the ways that team members get to know each other when personal or family information is shared. Talk about other staff members, school activities, or community events might be considered outside of the agenda of planning, but drifting is a means to share important information. Humor, like chocolate, serves to break the tension and provides momentary relief from the hard work of planning. Talk that drifts is often brought back with orienting talk. Both activities may be essential to the structure of a good model for planning.

A Good Model for Planning

These activities—orienting, coordinating, making connections, and making sense—look a lot like common problem-solving or decision-making models that include identifying a problem, gathering information, choosing steps to take, drawing conclusions, and then returning to refine or restate the problem. Wolcott (1994) found that teachers do not plan in the linear manner prescribed by instructional designers. My research also found that, while these activities were always present in planning, they never fit a regular or linear pattern. Additionally, the activity of drifting may be important to provide space or breaks from the pressures of planning together. Drifting from the topic was a means of drifting together, learning about each other, and forming social bonds. When the analysis of these activities was shared with the participating teachers, they agreed this was "a good model for planning."

"We Know What Each Other Knows"

While all of the activities of drifting, orienting, coordinating, making connections, and making sense were important to planning, the activity of "making sense" best represents the kinds of professional learning enabled by collaboration. Through making sense, team members challenge each other to reflect on the meanings students will make of resources, lessons, and learning objectives. In the process, teachers share practices that worked (or not) in their own classrooms and seek ways to improve past practices.

In a recent survey, teachers identified collaboration with colleagues as the most highly valued type of professional learning experience and identified "helped me create new lessons, materials or instructional strategies for immediate use" as the number one way a learning experience impacted their practice (National Center for Literacy Education (NCLE) 2013, 11). The NCLE survey also found that where there were higher levels of collaboration reported there were also a higher level of trust and increased spread of best practices.

Teachers in my study placed a similar value on collaborative planning with the school librarian as a way to learn about resources, get lesson ideas and strategies, and build a cohesive team. As one teacher remarked, "I think we have that trust because we plan together, and we know what each other knows."

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Works Cited:


