

Learning Cycles

A POWERFUL TOOL FOR TEACHER-TO-TEACHER PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

In this latest installment of our series on teacher leadership, we describe how a learning cycle framework can provide a useful structure to support teacher leaders as they plan and facilitate powerful teacher-led professional learning.

Learning cycles aren't new to education. In fact, they've been around for decades, resulting in many permutations such as inquiry cycles, PDSA (Plan-Do-Study-Act), problem-solving cycles, and cycles of continuous improvement. But the core purpose remains the same: To iteratively and intentionally refine a method for improving outcomes. Many educators — ranging from district leaders to school reform committees to classroom teachers — use learning cycles to provide a structure for addressing various complex processes.

In a learning cycle's simplest form, educators begin by using data to identify a problem, then select a research-based approach to address that problem. Next, they test the approach, collect and examine new data, reflect on the effectiveness of the approach, consider adjustments, and implement again. For example, a school team might use a cycle of inquiry to examine a disciplinary policy that appears to disproportionately target one group of students. Or a professional learning community might use a learning cycle to improve instruction of process-oriented writing in mathematics.

Research, and data from the Teacher Practice Networks (TPN) initiative,¹ have shown that teacher leaders are well-positioned to help other teachers improve their standards-aligned instruction, without being evaluative of teacher performance.² However, while teacher leaders are often identified because they are highly effective classroom teachers and can demonstrate pedagogical expertise, leading their peers in meaningful professional learning entails more than just sharing knowledge about curricula and instructional strategies. To be effective, teacher leaders require support to carry out their leadership work, including training in processes that help guide and facilitate the kinds of professional learning that transform practice. One such process is a learning cycle, which can be a primary part of a teacher leader's toolkit for leading productive professional learning experiences.

Teacher
leaders have
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strengthen professional
development in a way
that is far more meaningful
and relevant than bringing
in district facilitators
or outsiders.
– TPN Teacher
Leader

¹ The Teacher Practice Networks, a five-year initiative in collaboration with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, has been advancing K–12 instruction aligned to college- and career-readiness standards through the efforts of teacher leadership.

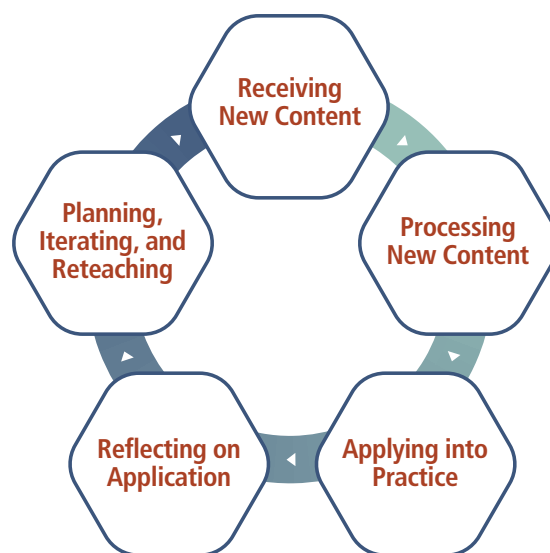
² Berg, J., Carver, C., & Mangin, M. (2014). Teacher leader model standards: Implications for preparation, policy, and practice. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, 9(2), 195–217.

Learning cycles articulate structure for teacher-to-teacher learning

Since 2013, hundreds of teacher leaders have been participating in the TPN initiative,³ designed to advance instruction aligned to state standards through teacher leadership. Through annual data collected across the TPN, including surveys of teacher leaders and the teachers they lead, The Center for the Future of Teaching & Learning at WestEd has found that teacher leaders are better prepared to lead when armed with tools or a structure, such as a learning cycle, to guide how they lead professional learning for their peers.

Over the last couple of years, a learning cycle framework has helped guide TPN teacher leaders in planning and leading robust, collaborative professional learning. This framework, outlined in Figure 1, reflects a continuous improvement mindset in which teachers learn, test, reflect, and iteratively refine a pedagogical strategy.

Figure 1. TPN learning cycle framework



Source: Teacher Practice Networks initiative

Data suggest that teacher leaders are purposeful in how they help their colleagues progress through the phases of this learning cycle to continually refine and improve instruction. Based on TPN Professional Learning Activity Logs from 2017-18, a quarter or more of their time is devoted to supporting other teachers in the phases *Applying into Practice* (27 percent) and *Planning, Iterating, and Reteaching* (25 percent). These data show that TPN teacher leaders are actively engaged across all phases of the learning cycle.

What teacher-led inquiry and collaboration looks like in a learning cycle

TPN teacher leaders implement a variety of activities to engage the teachers they lead through the phases of the learning cycle. For example, teacher leaders in a particular district might lead their professional learning communities (PLCs) through learning cycles focused on using “math talk” as a strategy for teaching students to question, predict, and build on others’ ideas. In the initial phases of this learning cycle, a teacher leader at one school might ask colleagues in her PLC to bring prior knowledge of the strategy, watch and inquire about an authentic classroom video of students engaged in small-group math conversations, and reflect on their own students’ struggles and successes with math conversations. A teacher leader at another school in the district might facilitate a fishbowl-style experience for the PLC

³ Since 2013, a total of 38 professional organizations have participated in the TPN, developing and supporting nearly 800 teacher leaders, who have led more than 12,000 participating teachers in sustained, teacher-led professional learning. Currently, 6 organizations partner with schools and districts in rural, urban, and suburban areas to support 101 teacher leaders, and the 1,157 teachers they lead, in sustained, teacher-to-teacher professional learning.

in which some of the teachers engage in math talk, then all of the teachers reflect on the experience and identify the literacy and discourse skills needed to participate in this type of learning. From there, teachers would plan backwards by identifying scaffolded activities to give students opportunities to practice those skills.

These examples represent just some of the many possibilities of how a teacher leader can engage peers in initial exploration and learning of a new instructional strategy before teachers are expected to try it in their classrooms. In these examples, teachers participate in intentionally planned activities to deepen understanding of one strategy, as they continue to meet in ongoing sessions to collaborate, question, reflect, and refine.

Teacher-leader-led professional learning: Learning cycle in action **Aja facilitates a problem-solving cycle**

Aja teaches English at a public high school in South Central Los Angeles, where she is also a teacher leader. She is only a fourth-year teacher, but she uses her few years of classroom experience to her advantage, reminding her peers that she has as much to learn as they in their teacher-to-teacher professional learning.

Aja attended two full days of training from Teach Plus on the problem-solving cycle, adult learning, and facilitation skills. Equipped with a learning cycle framework and strategies for leading her peers, Aja met with her English department colleagues to identify a problem of practice they all wanted to explore and focus on for their cycle. The team decided on “inference-making” as their problem of practice.

Using a discussion sharing protocol, the teachers described students’ challenges with making inferences in their classrooms and found that their students shared common learning issues. Together, the teachers set a goal of what student proficiency in this skill would look like in five months. Aja led her peers through brainstorming possible strategies for supporting students in making inferences, and the group reached a consensus to focus on trying an agreed-upon strategy until their next meeting. In the meantime, teachers tested the strategy and immediately reflected on their lesson, asking themselves, *What worked? What didn’t work? What did I see, hear, or feel during the lesson? What would I do differently?* During the next three sessions, Aja and her colleagues shared their reflections, discussed their progress, examined student work, revised lesson plans, and refined instruction. Aja, and eventually three other teachers, brought videotaped recordings of their lessons to share and/or modeled lessons and invited observations from their peers, which contributed to building a culture of vulnerability and openness.

Throughout this learning cycle led by Aja, the team collaborated to learn, reflect, refine, and deepen instructional practice. At the end of the cycle, the teachers showcased their student work and examined student success against their goal.

Strengthening reflective habits throughout a learning cycle

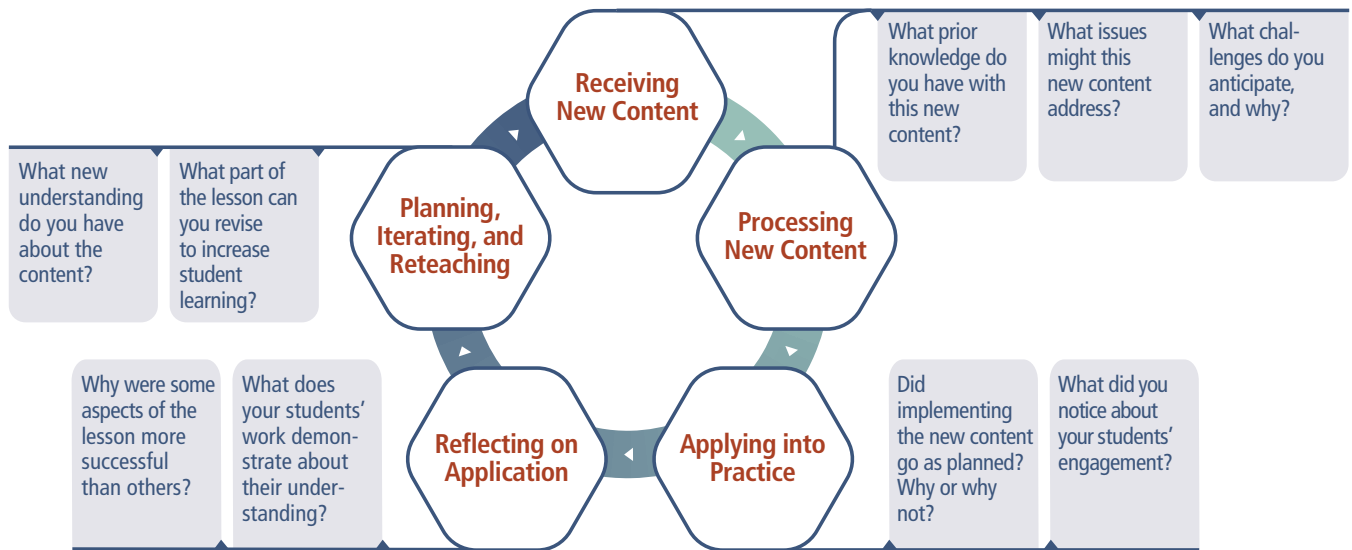
We know that reflection is a critical piece in adult learning to transforming beliefs or practices.⁴ Without taking the time to reflect, it is difficult to identify where or how change is needed. In the learning cycle outlined in Figure 1, reflection is called out in its own phase that follows *Applying into Practice* and precedes *Planning, Iterating, and Reteaching*. While it makes sense at that point in the learning cycle for teachers to take time to reflect, examine student data, and consider any necessary adaptations, in reality, reflection is an iterative process that occurs throughout the entire learning cycle. Teachers should continuously be asking themselves a range of reflective questions throughout all phases of a cycle: *What issue will this strategy address? What skills do my students already have to succeed with this strategy? What new skills do they need to practice? Which students struggled with the lesson, and why? What adjustments should I make for next steps?*

4 Dewey, J. (1933). *How we think: A restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educative process*. Boston, MA: D.C. Heath; Schon, D. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. New York: Basic Books.

Understandably, teachers challenged to find time between planning, teaching, grading, meeting, and putting out fires have little time to reflect in ways that lead to transformative learning. But teacher leaders can help their colleagues incorporate more reflective habits throughout the learning cycle. We observed in our TPN data that teacher leaders support their peers in reflecting on their practice in different ways and to differing degrees of depth. For instance, reflection sometimes involves an informal conversation or a written response on a group site about what worked, what didn't work, and what might be done differently. Or reflection can be more formal, such as observing another teacher's practice and facilitating a follow-up conversation using a protocol, or analyzing student work to understand where instruction needs modifying.

To help teachers become more habitual in thinking deeply about their own practice, teacher leaders can incorporate reflective questions throughout a learning cycle, such as those shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Examples of reflective questions to ask throughout a learning cycle



Source: Teacher Practice Networks initiative

Establishing a healthy climate of reflection and growth

Learning cycles are most effective when there is a healthy teacher-to-teacher climate for productive learning. Teacher leaders, aware of their peer relationship with colleagues, work hard to establish trust and make clear that they are peer coaches and facilitators, but not supervisors. Teacher leaders are sensitive to their peers feeling safe and not feeling evaluated or judged. Rather than calling out deficiencies in their peers' teaching, they use supportive, problem-solving language, such as, *What further support can you provide to students — clearer instructions, student examples, higher expectations, more opportunities to practice a task?* Below are strategies offered by TPN teacher leaders for fostering a supportive climate conducive to fruitful learning cycles.

Tips for teacher leaders

- Approach role as a peer who wants to learn collaboratively alongside other teachers.
- Start by putting yourself out there. Model vulnerability by inviting peers to observe authentic instruction of your teaching either via video or in person and solicit their feedback.
- Give teachers space to come to their own realizations.
- Value colleagues where they are at in their practice and what they can offer, regardless of experience.
- Find multiple ways to re-approach a teaching challenge until one works.

Tips for administrators

- Foster a culture of empowered professionalism, where teachers are expected to grow in their careers.
- Help create a teacher climate that supports open classrooms and sharing of practice.
- Emphasize and encourage observation as a tool for growth, not evaluation.
- Be consistent in supporting teacher professional learning that enables the change.
- Have patience for instructional change to occur.

Teacher-leader-led professional learning: Learning cycle in action

Regina and Ben anticipate and plan for apprehension at the start of a new learning cycle

Co-teacher leaders Regina and Ben are middle and high school social studies teachers, respectively, who share the responsibilities of planning professional learning, facilitating in-person and virtual learning, and responding to the queries of 25 teachers, grades 6–12, in their school district who are trying a new pedagogical approach in their social studies classrooms. Regina and Ben are experienced implementers of this pedagogical approach, *civil conversation*, a student-centered method of analyzing text. As teacher leaders, they draw from their experiences using civil conversation with their own students as well as training they received from the Constitutional Rights Foundation, which also provided them with strategies for addressing teacher resistance to student-centered learning.

Shifting teachers' instructional practice toward a more student-centered approach to learning such as civil conversation can be a big change, and often includes shifting teachers' mindsets about student capacity. Regina and Ben valued knowing the readiness of their teacher cohort to implement this new approach, so they asked teachers to complete a survey prior to their three-hour, in-person professional learning session. Informed by the survey, the teacher leaders knew to anticipate some teacher apprehension.

They introduced civil conversation to their colleagues by describing how it's a student-centered approach to making sense of text and by sharing articles on the topic that they found helpful. As a group, they viewed authentic classroom videos of teachers facilitating civil conversation with students who are demographically similar to the students in their own schools. Regina and Ben then organized teachers into small groups to discuss anticipated challenges and exchange ideas for ways to scaffold civil conversation in their classrooms. In addition to focusing on pedagogy, the teacher leaders devoted time to the importance of creating a conducive classroom climate by establishing norms with the students about acceptable behavior for discussing challenging issues and ways to disagree civilly.

Participating teachers agreed that within the next three weeks, they would try civil conversation in their classrooms, knowing that it would take time for students and teachers to feel comfortable with it. Teachers also agreed to participate in a Q & A webinar for troubleshooting and sharing tips about implementing civil conversation in their classrooms. Finally, teachers shared their reflections about their instruction in an online space, where they were invited to respond to the reflections of other teachers from this community. Regina and Ben used the opportunity to offer additional instructional guidance with civil conversation as teachers continued to refine the practice in their classrooms.

Conclusion

Aja, Regina, Ben, and other teacher leaders have the potential to use learning cycles to strengthen teacher professional learning, making it more purposeful, reflective, and relevant to how teachers learn. Compared to traditional “sit-and-get” professional development, which has very little teacher engagement, teacher-to-teacher professional learning structured as a learning cycle offers teachers meaningful opportunities to engage deeply in learning that is grounded in their actual practice. While many teacher leaders are already doing this work effectively, more schools and districts need to equip their teacher leaders with leadership skills, adult learning theory, and professional learning strategies — including learning cycles and reflective questioning — in order for them to lead effective teacher professional learning in nuanced ways that only a teacher leader can.

The Center for the Future of Teaching & Learning at WestEd is dedicated to strengthening teacher practice. For over two decades, The Center has been steadfast in the pursuit of its mission to ensure that every child learns from a fully prepared and effective teacher.

WestEd is a research, development, and service agency whose mission is to promote excellence, achieve equity, and improve learning for children, youth, and adults.

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