Picture it: You walk into a classroom and the students are huddled in small groups, animatedly talking about the theme in a text, citing evidence from their notes, good-naturedly arguing the validity of one another’s points…. Ahhh… heaven!

Collaboration is a key component in common core instruction. The standards ask students to work collaboratively with diverse partners, in diverse formats, in order to exchange ideas, share perspectives and evaluate the credibility of information and arguments. Sounds great, right? But putting successful collaborative structures into place in the classroom can be tricky! Students do not necessarily have the skills to work efficiently and effectively together. And teachers can have issues not only with developing these skills in their students, but also letting go of a perceived command of the classroom. So where to begin?

There are a couple of entry points that can help teachers begin to implement a more collaborative culture in the classroom. First, it’s helpful to talk briefly with teachers about why collaboration is a valuable skill and how it can actually make their classrooms a more dynamic environment. A great article for this is from a blog called Cooperative Catalyst. (Continued on page 2)
The Art of Collaboration, cont’d

The article is called, “Why Should Students Collaborate” by Peter Skillen and calls out how collaboration, “promotes and supports the externalization of knowledge” and “encourages one to consider and resolve cognitive issues in order to participate effectively.” It’s a great starting point to get teachers thinking about how it can enhance their instruction.

Next, it’s helpful to show some classroom footage of students engaged in a variety of collaborative structures, so teachers can explicitly see how it plays out in the classroom. Then it would be important to share some protocols and practices for beginning to teach collaboration to students. Here’s a great collection of strategies to get you going: http://www.lacoe.edu/Portals/0/Curriculum-Instruction/RLA_Collaboration and Engagement Routines.pdf

The key to not getting discouraged when first trying these out is to start small. Think-Pair-Share is an easy and mightily under-used tool that teaches the basic skill of listening and sharing. Use it daily, switching partners, until students are comfortable with the process and it becomes almost an automatic response to turn and talk. While students are mastering this, it’s also useful to do very short mini-lessons on active listening skills and the use of sentence starters for sharing one another’s ideas.

From here, simple structured protocols can be introduced. The 1-3-6 Protocol is an excellent strategy that grows naturally from Think-Pair-Share. Students write individually first, share in a group of 3, then two groups of 3 meet up, compare ideas and come up with either an agreed upon viewpoint or outcome with evidence.

There are many great protocols to experiment with, depending on the outcome that is desired. Which leads to a really important point. Collaboration for the sake of collaboration is not very powerful. Clear processes and outcomes go a long way to ensure successful and engaging interactions among students. One of the best videos I have ever seen demonstrates a Socratic seminar: https://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/teaching-the-n-word This teacher does an amazing job of implementing extensive and effective collaborative classroom structures-check it out!

To learn more, sign up to attend Guide on the Side, not Sage on the Stage: The Art of Effective Collaboration on Oct. 15 and 26: http://lacoe.k12oms.org/1540-97401

Resources for Developing Collaborative Structures

Great articles for starting the conversation with teachers and coaches:

http://www.edutopia.org/blog/deeper-learning-collaboration-key-rebecca-alber


https://coopcatalyst.wordpress.com/2011/01/26/why-should-students-collaborate/

Video clips showcasing effective collaborative structures:

https://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/structured-groups

https://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/1-3-6-protocol

Imaginations shared create collaboration, and collaboration creates community, and community inspires social change.

-Terry Tempest Williams