

A person wearing a dark jacket, a beanie, and a large backpack is standing on a rocky shore, looking out at the ocean. The sun is setting on the horizon, creating a warm, orange glow that reflects on the water. The sky is filled with soft, white clouds. The overall mood is contemplative and hopeful.

# BRINGING TEACHER LEARNING TO LIFE

Courageous Teaching Using Peer Learning Labs  
to Elevate Efficacy

By Annie Patterson and Timeri Tolnay

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Educators today are challenged to respond simultaneously to changing laws, standards, and initiatives that define the work of the profession at the state and national level. New standards, including the Common Core, give us an opportunity as a nation to name what students should know and be able to do as they prepare to enter the workforce and college. In this climate of high stakes accountability, every aspect of a teacher's practice is now under the microscope.

Teacher effectiveness remains the single most powerful influence on student achievement. To this end, educators need ongoing, rigorous learning opportunities to continuously hone their instructional practice. Real changes in instructional practice come about through professional

development focused at the classroom level on student learning. Collegial conversations about classroom observations enable teachers to access ideas, uncover strategies, and identify resources. The Peer Learning Lab structure advances school-based initiatives by creating opportunities for data collection and analysis, as participants study formative assessments and student work. Peer Learning Labs create a forum for the authentic learning teachers need to experience in order to grow their instructional practice.

Peer Learning Labs are one such professional learning structure: labs support teachers' professional growth, facilitate collaboration, and inspire all to improve their instructional practice.

## Peer Learning Labs:

- Increase teacher effectiveness and thereby student achievement
- Provide job-embedded professional learning, within the context of a school or district
- Offer differentiated support to teachers across the span of their careers
- Heighten a faculty's sense of their own collective efficacy

“The hard lesson we have gleaned from analyzing various waves of education reform is that it doesn’t matter what happens at the national, state, or even district level unless change takes place at the building and classroom levels, improvement is unlikely.”

(Thomas R. Guskey, *JSD* Winter 2005 vol. 26, No. 1 p.40.)

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## TEACHERS ANSWER THEIR OWN CRITICAL QUESTIONS

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How can I best support all learners in meeting and exceeding new standards?

What key instructional practices will lead to improvements in content knowledge, skills, and student engagement?

How will I know whether my instructional decisions are making a difference for student learning?

How can I ensure that all students achieve at high levels?

In what ways can I continue to grow my practice?





Our task as educators is to find answers to these critical questions through our daily classroom practice. To this end, Peer Learning Labs provide for collaboration with purpose. As teachers observe colleagues in their own school setting, name best practices, examine student work, offer insights, and puzzle together over student misconceptions and breakthroughs, they grow their own instructional practice, forge meaningful relationships with colleagues, and, as a result, their commitment to teaching and learning is strengthened. Teachers engaged in rich professional development of this nature remain dedicated to their work in classrooms.

At the Public Education & Business Coalition (PEBC), we work side by side with educators to implement research based instructional practices and provide customized, on-going professional learning at the district and school level. For over three decades, PEBC has based its professional development on the tenant, “Seeing is Believing.” When teachers visit the classroom of a colleague and observe students diving into intellectually challenging tasks and engaging in high levels of discourse, they come away from the experience with new insights about instructional practices they might transfer to their own

setting. These inquiry-based observations are designed as opportunities for teachers to improve their practice by observing colleagues in action, and participating in structured debrief discussions facilitated by a skilled staff developer.

Throughout this document we have included resources to support the work of classroom teachers, instructional coaches, school and district leaders as they open doors and leverage change through Peer Learning Labs. Our hope is that this document will serve as a guide for thinking about creating Peer Learning Labs anchored to Professional Learning Communities that support learning at all levels.

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## In This Document, we have included:

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Specific ways Peer Learning Labs support Professional Learning Communities as an effective structure for improving teacher practice and student learning

Recommendations for implementing Peer Learning Labs including the components of a Peer Learning Lab: Preparation, Lab Day, and Follow-Up

A vignette of a Peer Learning Lab in action

The important role Peer Learning Labs play in an inquiry cycle to support systemic professional learning

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# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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In 2002, authors Annie Patterson and Timeri Tolnay refined an existing PEBC lab classroom format and began working with school based Peer Learning Labs. Throughout this document, they have included resources to support the work of classroom teachers, instructional coaches, and school and district leaders, to open doors and leverage change through

the implementation of Peer Learning Labs.

After hundreds of hours facilitating professional learning through labs, Patterson and Tolnay saw the profound impact Learning Labs have on improving teacher practice. They believe every educator should have the opportunity to learn in a classroom, to feel the

energy of the students, to see and hear firsthand the instructional moves that generate students' deep understanding. Both Annie and Timeri continue to promote teacher learning with Peer Learning Labs: Annie serves as a Senior Director of Education with PEBC, while Timeri most recently served as the Vice President of Inquiry by Design.



Annie Patterson



Timeri Tolnay



In thriving classrooms, teachers and students cultivate creativity, pursue deep questions, and engage in critical thinking to generate understanding. In order for learners to achieve at high levels, their teachers need opportunities to observe, explore, examine, and research effective instruction. Opening doors through structured Peer Learning Lab observations represents an important shift away from teacher isolation toward a shared understanding of best practices in action.

## Collective Efficacy

Typically, teachers work alone for most of the 50 hours they spend each week, managing, instructing, grading, planning, and differentiating instruction to meet the wide range of skill levels and needs of their students (Marvel, Lytelr, Peltola, Strizek, & Morton, 2007). In 1975, Educational sociologist Dan Lortie described the traditional classroom environment as a form of

“cellular isolation,” and new research from The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher in 2012 shows that not much has changed in the last thirty-five years: 90% of teachers continue to spend their days in school separated from their peers (MetLife, 2012). Participating in Peer Learning Labs creates authentic opportunities for teachers to share their work, solve problems collaboratively, and inspire peers to grow as teachers and learners.

Learning involves making one’s self vulnerable: asking questions, taking risks, reflecting on both successes and failures. The same is true for effective teaching. It takes courage for teachers to explore big questions about teaching and learning, questions that challenge everything they know, questions like, “What does student understanding look and sound like? And, “How do I support all students to achieve at high levels?”

## Courage

It also takes courage for teachers to open their doors

to colleagues, inviting them in to observe instruction in action, as they collectively investigate what it means to teach and learn. A benefit of this type of collaborative teacher learning is that participating teachers increase their collective efficacy, their belief that they can ensure that all students achieve at high levels.

As Carol Dweck notes in her book, *Mindset*, students with a growth mindset — those who believe that intelligence is something you learn, not something you are born with — are more willing to struggle with challenging tasks and are more comfortable with taking the intellectual risks necessary for learning. A growth-minded teacher pushes her practice and finds ways to address individual students’ learning needs. Participating in Peer Learning Labs creates authentic opportunities for teacher learning as they share student work, solve problems of practice collaboratively, and inspire peers to grow as teachers and learners.



“It is clear that closed classroom doors will not help us educate all students to high levels. It is also clear that what happens in classrooms matters for student learning and that we can do more together than we can do individually to improve learning and teaching.”

(City, Elmore, Fiarman, and Teitel, 2009, p.3)

## Teacher Learning in the Classroom

For the past decade, educators have been working to increase teacher efficacy through collaboration in Professional Learning Communities. Rick DuFour offered us a rationale and structure for Professional Learning Communities; teachers use these forums to discuss instruction, look at evidence of student learning, and collaborate about their work. DuFour argued, “In order to establish schools in which inter-dependence and collaboration are the new norm, we must create the structures and cultures that embed collaboration in the routine practice of

our schools, ensure that the collaborative efforts focus on the right work, and support educators as they build their capacity to work together rather than alone.” (DuFour, 2004). While these focused forums for collaboration are essential, they often occur outside of the classroom - after school, at a conference, or away from actual students.

Peer Learning Labs are grounded in the work of Professional Learning Communities but take that work further, situating teacher learning right alongside the student learning taking place in the classroom. The lab format offers participants time to focus on student understanding as the result



of an unfolding lesson and then deconstruct the instructional moves that made an impact.

Peer Learning Labs are a key opportunity for teachers' professional learning. The classroom is the place where the nuances of planning, instruction, and assessment come together. Doug Reeves points out, "observing professional practice in action has been a missing link in professional development in this country." (Reeves, 2010, p.81) Indeed, the observational component of Peer Learning Labs within a professional learning community, framed by a facilitated structure with shared norms:

- supports adult learners to envision new practices;
- motivates teachers to try out and transfer new instructional techniques;
- increases teacher efficacy and effectiveness.

The professional learning community movement has taught educators that "a collection of superstar

teachers working in isolation cannot produce the same results as interdependent colleagues who share and develop professional practices together (Garmston & Welman, 1999, p.18)." Peer

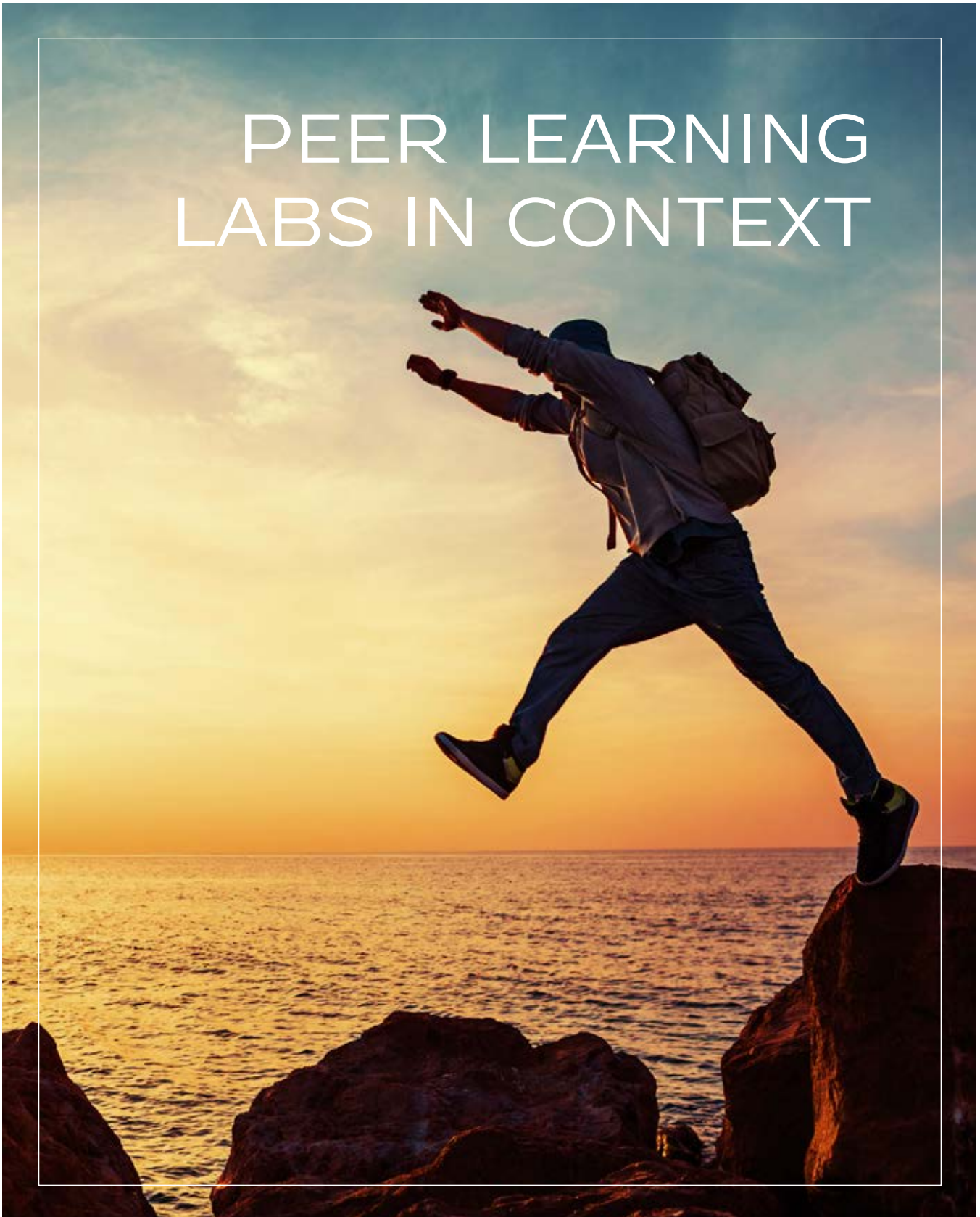
Learning Labs are a useful professional development model for building professional community while promoting teachers' growth.

## THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP

School leaders' participation is an essential ingredient in the success of systemic, school wide, professional learning focused on student growth. Peer Learning Labs offer school leaders a forum where they can bring coherence to new standards and calibrate a vision of quality instruction and formative assessment.

Leaders know that for teachers to effectively implement new initiatives, teachers need time and resources to engage in learning at the school site. As principal Jerry Becking from Burns High School in Wyoming points out, "I'm only as good as my teachers. I need to model learning while creating a compelling case for improvement."

# PEER LEARNING LABS IN CONTEXT



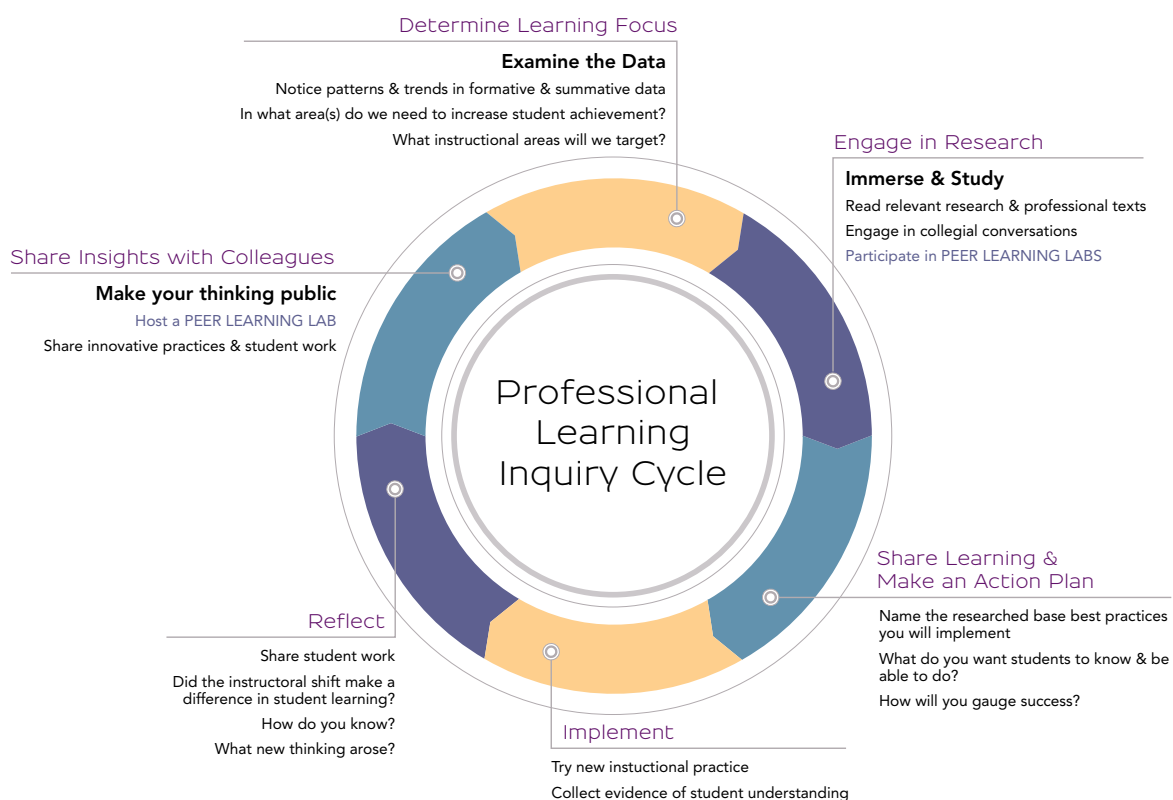
Peer Learning Labs are not a stand-alone professional development offering; they serve teachers best as part of an inquiry cycle.

To launch an inquiry cycle, teachers meet to explore a shared question about improving student achievement within their school context. The inquiry questions may arise from patterns and trends observed in school data, in response to new standards, while implementing new curriculum, or

attempting to address new policies. Through the entire inquiry process, teachers read educational research and professional texts together about their shared area of focus. Participating teachers discuss classroom applications and try out innovative practices. When ready, a member of the inquiry group invites colleagues to observe their instruction in the context of a Peer Learning Lab.

Following the Peer Learning Lab experience, members

of the inquiry group return to their own classrooms to implement some of the practices observed. They collect student work, assess students' learning, and then share those insights with colleagues. The entire cycle of inquiry then continues: the group hones or expands their inquiry question; goes on to read additional research and professional texts, and different teachers come forward to host Peer Learning Labs around other areas of focus.





## PARTICIPATING IN A PEER LEARNING LAB

Participating in a Peer Learning Lab is like embarking on a voyage in a glass-bottom boat. From this unique perspective, being in the classroom, but not of it, observers gain greater insight into the complexities of teaching and learning.

In the way that a glass-bottom boat can help us see life under the sea, Peer Learning Labs help us look more deeply at a teacher's use of instructional techniques to nurture student understanding. These voyages offer participants an opportunity to leave their individual reef system, and enter the viewing cabin of the glass-bottom boat to dwell in the classroom of a colleague. Through observing the world of another, teachers envision new possibilities for their own classrooms. Collaboration through Peer Learning Labs offers educators the chance to engage in highly effective professional development in the most important setting: the classroom itself.



*Photo Credit: James Creighton*

A Peer Learning Lab, like a glass bottom boat, is simply a vehicle, not a destination. The destination to which we are all navigating is increased student understanding and achievement. The Peer Learning Lab is simply a vessel that can help us move there faster, collectively and more efficiently. The "lab" structure is based on a three-part framework guided by a skilled facilitator: a prebrief, an observation, and a debrief. Using specific protocols, this format provides teachers with a process for building a

shared vision of what student understanding looks and sounds like, as well as time to reflect on the instructional strategies that facilitate that understanding.

This process of observing and deconstructing best practices helps teachers articulate how to adapt instructional techniques to improve student achievement in their own classrooms. Being in the classroom is a three dimensional experience that can't be replicated through video observation. Participants have the

opportunity to *experience* a lesson: to feel the energy of the students, the flow of time, to notice how the physical arrangement and organization of materials supports student learning,

to learn from the ways students interact with each other. Situating professional learning inside a real-time classroom with structured, well-facilitated conversations before and

after the observation, allows participants to deepen their understanding of best practices and then to implement their new learning for the benefit of students.

“Being a guest in someone’s classroom is priceless. Excitement resonates through my veins as I begin to capture, develop, reflect and create ideas of my own for my own classroom. Being able to step into an already made classroom and view the events live allows me to absorb all the information (visually, auditorily, and kinesthetically), which goes above and beyond most workshops for teacher professional development. As an observer, I entered the lab experience as a dry sponge and upon completion I left time and again sopping wet with ideas and strategies to try within my own classroom. It was because of the ‘live’ experience of observing a classroom in action that made such an impact on my teaching. I could see the difference between their classroom and mine, I could hear the differences, and I could experience the environment and atmosphere. This allowed me to visualize my current practices and sharpen my vision to align with my beliefs.”

— Candice Halligan, Burns Elementary School, Burns Wyoming

## OUR BELIEFS ABOUT TEACHING AND LEARNING

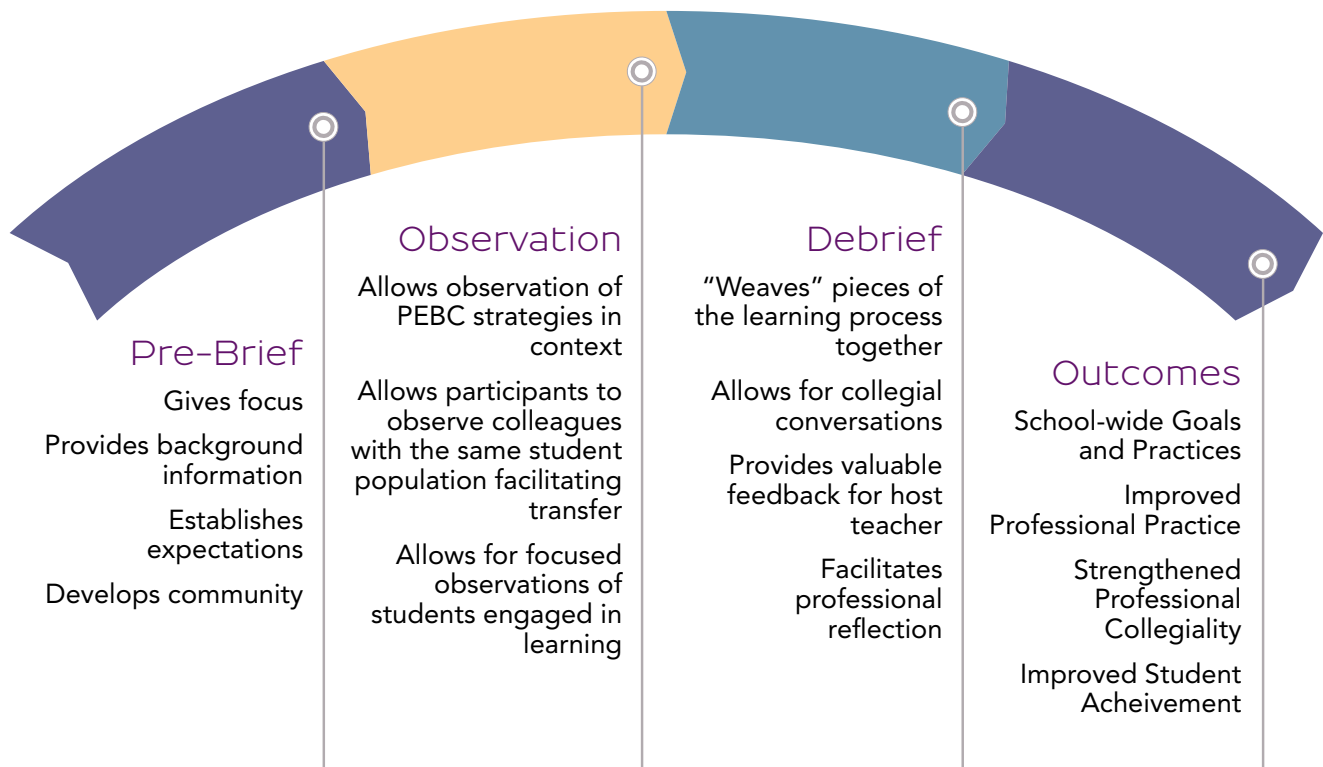
1. **We get smarter together.** Learning happens when we build trust and develop collegial relationships.
2. **We're never done.** Our job as a teacher is to be the Lead Learner. We always have more to understand about students, about teaching and learning, and about our content. Teachers who have intellectual lives of their own foster the intellectual lives of their students.
3. **Seeing is Believing.** Observing a colleague opens the door to new possibilities. It shifts our expectations as we "reimagine" what is possible in our own classrooms and dissect student learning at the core.
4. **Inquiry Matters.** We are driven by our questions. We examine student data, read research and professional text about best practices, try out those best practices in our classrooms, examine the resulting student work, and ask new questions starting the inquiry cycle again.
5. **Understanding is the Goal.** We are teaching children to think strategically and critically as they grow their understanding and develop new insights about content. Understanding continues to expand as we learn with and from students and colleagues.

## THE PROCESS OF A PEER LEARNING LAB EXPERIENCE

Effective Peer Learning Labs require careful preparation, a well-facilitated lab experience, and deliberate follow through. The components of a Peer Learning Lab include:

Preparation	Lab Day	Follow-Up
Pre-Planning / Coaching	Prebrief	Follow-up on-site
Host Letter to Participants	Observation	Coaching for Participating Teachers
	Debrief	

## Components of a Peer Learning Lab





## Preparation

The lesson featured on lab day needs to be intentionally planned. In advance of the observation, the lab host writes a letter to participants to orient observers to the classroom.

### Coaching and Pre-Planning

Prior to a Peer Learning Lab, the host teacher receives support from an instructional coach, department chair, school administrator, or someone charged with overseeing instruction, to plan the best possible lesson for lab day. Coaching conversations prior to the lab help the lab host clarify student learning targets, evidence of student understanding, and to select instructional practices to achieve those goals. Articulating instructional decisions helps the host link best practice research from their inquiry cycle work to actual student instruction. Planning with the end in mind helps guide the debrief, ensuring that lab participants

will know what evidence of student learning to focus on during the observation.

### Host Letter to Participants

After planning the lesson, the host writes a letter to lab participants sharing their inquiry question and naming how they are striving to improve student achievement. The letter also includes the context of the class, a description of the unit of study, a sketch of the lesson plan for the day, the intended learning targets for the period, and assessment strategies for determining success.

Part of the Coaching and Pre-Planning should focus on the creation of the host's letter. The instructional coach reads one or more drafts of the letter, and provides feedback, taking advantage of opportunities to challenge the lab host to think more deeply or flexibly where appropriate.

### A Peer Learning Lab in Action: Preparation

Before hosting a Peer Learning Lab, teacher John Nolan of Alameda, California meets with his facilitator, Timeri, via email, on the phone, and in person at a coffee shop the night before, to discuss the plan for the lesson. During these conversations, Timeri listens to John describe his lesson plan, and is able to ask him questions to uncover his rationale for the instructional decisions he is making. Her questions help him articulate his learning targets, and tie his instructional strategies to the professional reading he has been doing. As a result, he is better able to explain his work in his letter to the visitors.

*Dear Visitors,*

*Thank you for visiting this class. I've appreciated the opportunity to participate in this series of learning labs as we learn together to think about how to support our students. I am in the middle of a magazine study of non-fiction writing. As part of this study, each of my 10th grade students will write a magazine article modeled after the ones we read in class. During this study, I especially want to get better at supporting my students to do the thinking and the talking. I feel this is important for my culturally and linguistically diverse learners because many of my students don't feel comfortable speaking up in mainstream classes, or if they do, it is in a non-academic way. So that's why I have a daily routine of teaching academic vocabulary, and also why I try to create as many opportunities as possible for my students to speak. They have a pretty good handle on social discourse, so I'm trying to facilitate more academic discourse.*

*My learning targets focus on the ways I want my students to be able to notice specific writing strategies used by the author for leads, transitions, and subheadings. This way when students are writing their own magazine articles, they can employ these techniques themselves. I will confer with students to learn from them about what they notice in the model text and what they think about the exemplar.*

*In order to facilitate this student discourse, I'm focusing on keeping my questions open-ended, directing the questions toward how students talk to others when they are in groups, making sure everyone gets called on—according to a random system instead of calling on students punitively. Also, in reading Steven Reinhart's article, "Never Say Anything a Kid Can Say!" I was reminded of the need to give proper wait time to students trying to share before moving on, and of the need to pose the question to the whole class, with wait time before calling out a student's name. Another interesting tip I saw in the article that I've been trying to practice is giving standard, non-judgmental responses instead of gushing over or disapproving of or appearing indifferent to various remarks. Also, I want to focus on asking several students what they think about a question, or what they think about others' responses to a question, facilitating more of a discussion off of individual student responses.*

*For the lab today, please help me gather evidence of the following:*

- *students engaging in academic discourse;*
- *students' ability to notice and name writing strategies: leads, transitions, sub headings;*
- *my own facilitation of student talk.*

*Thank you for participating in my Peer Learning Lab today.*

*John Nolan  
High School English Teacher  
Island High School  
Alameda, California  
3-17-2010*

## Lab Day

Peer Learning Lab day includes three parts: a pre-brief, a classroom observation, and time to debrief. Well-structured discussion protocols are used to ensure all teachers participate, and the discourse is positive and respectful. This format allows host and participants to dig deep into the combined art and science of teaching in a non-threatening environment; through this structured opportunity to collaborate, the group is able to better understand the links between instruction, assessment, and student learning.

The day of the lab requires some logistical planning: participants need release time from their own instructional duties, and the group needs a place to meet before and after the observation. A well-structured lab day allots ample time to the pre-brief, observation and debrief, often an hour before the observation, and 90-120 minutes after.



## BUILDING TRUST: The Importance of Skilled Facilitation

Peer Learning Labs are grounded in inquiry. The facilitator is responsible for creating and sustaining a collegial community engaged in productive learning conversations. To this end, the facilitator needs to promote an even playing field, where all teammates are of equal status as they come together around a shared question of practice to observe peers, look at student work, and expand their repertoire of skills. The Peer Learning Lab is simply another text, a shared experience offering one vision that can inspire participating teachers to continue to explore the links between planning, instruction and assessment.

The most essential ingredient for a successful Peer Learning Lab is trust. To ensure the focus of the lab remains on patterns of learning in general, not on the host teacher personally, facilitators must be trained and conscientious about maintaining a spirit of collegial inquiry. Using prebrief, observation, and debrief protocols ensure an emotionally safe experience both for the lab host, as well as the participants. If not carefully facilitated, labs can descend into unproductive public coaching, mere showcasing of an expert, a group evaluation of an individual teacher, or excuse-making that justifies tolerance of the status quo. Any of these undermines the spirit of the Peer Learning Lab.

Reflective, humble and striving – these qualities mark an effective lab host; to cultivate these, the facilitator needs to avoid casting the host in the role of the “expert.” The strongest Peer Learning Labs include up-front and follow-up coaching for the host by the facilitator; yet the facilitator should avoid engaging in coaching conversations with the host in front of the other lab participants. In these ways, a facilitator can ensure safety and esteem for all involved.



## Pre-brief

Prior to the class observation, participants and the lab host gather with the lab facilitator to prepare for the day's learning. During the pre-brief, Timeri, as the facilitator, clearly explains the purpose of the Peer Learning Lab: to better serve our students and to achieve the goals we have determined. John, the host teacher shares his letter, as

well as describes what he has been wondering about and reading professionally.

Based on the information provided by the host, participants each choose an area of focus, a question they have about their own practice. Those might include how to:

- address standards
- differentiate for diverse learning needs
- help students grapple successfully with complex texts
- use rituals and routines to establish classroom culture
- foster meaningful whole-group discussions
- motivate and engage reluctant learners
- scaffold successful group work
- ask open-ended questions

## NORMS FOR OBSERVATION

- Silence is golden. Honor the existing classroom tone, structure, and community.
- It is not your turn to teach. Remember that you are a visitor in the classroom. If students try to engage you in conversation, redirect them: "What would you do if I wasn't here?"
- Be an active observer. Note not only what the teacher is doing, but move around, lean in, listen in to the conversation between students, and the conversation between teacher and student.
- We are not here to critique the teacher, but to learn from him/her.
- Generate further questions, connections, and extensions to your own work.
- Take responsibility for bringing back your recorded observations to the debrief session. These notes are a way for you to hold your thinking and make connections to your own classroom practice.

- facilitate student independence
- teach the writing of text-based argument
- harness the power of metacognition through frequent reflection
- assess learning targets

As a group, participants talk through how they will gather evidence of their focus throughout the observation. The facilitator reviews observational norms and the purpose of the lab. The facilitator and the host answer participants' questions.

## Observation

As a group, participants observe one class period,

taking notes around their named focus area(s), or problem(s) of practice. As observers, the group moves about the classroom during individual work time, leaning in to hear student conversations and observe learners' work. Participants are encouraged to take notes about what they see and hear as evidence of effective teacher moves and student learning. These notes will serve as data for the conversation when the group comes back together to debrief.

## Debrief

After the observation, the facilitator leads the group in describing what they each noticed, given their individual focus. Next, the

host shares the student work collected during the class period to serve as evidence of understanding. The group helps the teacher analyze the work; determine questions and possible next steps for instruction. Participants ask questions of the host, and each other, exploring the big questions that have arisen throughout the morning. The group tackles these together, engaging in inquiry-based dialogue about teaching and learning. Finally, participants name their "take aways" — what they've learned from the Peer Learning Lab overall — that they will carry back to and implement in their own classroom setting.

## Peer Learning Lab in Action: LAB DAY

Six language arts teachers from the Alameda Unified School District gather together at 8:00 a.m. over bagels and coffee in anticipation of visiting John's classroom. The school has provided them with half-day substitutes so that they can learn in the classroom of a colleague, with ample time for conversation about best practices before and after the observation visit.

## Pre-Brief

As the facilitator, Timeri sets the stage for the observation by offering participants time to read John's lab host letter. Next, the group asks clarifying questions, "What is the one thing you are really hoping your students learn today?"

John responds, "Well, I think there are actually two things. I want students to learn the new academic vocabulary of the day first; and later, to be able to notice signpost words as they read the assigned article, 'Penitentiary Chances.' I've noticed in student writing that they lack a decent command of the use of transitions, so we are going to read this exemplar text like writers."

Another teacher poses a probing question, "How will you know whether or not they've learned these things?" John goes on to explain some of his methods for formative assessment,

which helps everyone clue into the importance of instituting daily checks for understanding.

"Why did you choose this article, 'Penitentiary Chances'?" another teacher inquires. John explains that he teaches in an alternative high school, and many of his students idolize some of the celebrities discussed in the article. He wanted to find a piece of non-fiction text that was culturally relevant, but challenged students to see a different side of life. The article explores the downside of rappers doing time. "Penitentiary Chances" would serve as a model magazine article that later students would emulate when writing their own non-fiction article.

After this orientation to the classroom context and the day's lesson plan, Timeri turns to the participants, asking about their learning focus for the day. As each participant identifies their personal observation focus, shared

questions emerge about how to support culturally and linguistically diverse students:

- How can we help English language learners with their writing?
- How can we promote student inquiry?
- What does it take to engage all in high quality discourse?

John is the first to admit that he doesn't have it all figured out and invites the group to seek answers to those questions as they observe him and his students at work.

Timeri rounds out the pre-brief by setting norms for the observation. She describes the importance of being respectful of the classroom culture that John has created and asks the group to act as silent, engaged observers. "It is not our turn to teach," she says of herself and the visitors. "Our job is to listen and learn from the students, and from John."

So take this observational time for yourself as a learner to think through the nuances of classroom practice, maybe even collect questions you might have for John in the debrief.”

Finally, Timeri models for the group a method for taking notes: she invites participants to record the teacher moves and evidence of student learning they observe, to collect the evidence John requested, as well as evidence around their own area of focus. She describes the importance of taking notes, “I want you to be grounded in descriptions of actual classroom practice, and to be able to name specifically what you see and hear, instead of speaking in generalities. Your notes will become the data we use in the debrief as we tease out not only John’s lesson today, but instructional practices in general that lead to student understanding. During the debrief we will

also explore connections to your classroom practice and what you may want to adapt from John’s classroom today.”

## Classroom Observation

Observers silently enter the classroom, notebooks and pens poised, as students begin with independent writing. John moves onto a vocabulary routine, and then asks learners to work in pairs to analyze a text. John asks many open-ended questions to encourage students to engage in the article: “Who do you recognize in these pictures? What do you notice about how the article is written?”

Students move into small groups to read the article more carefully, and annotate the author’s use of signpost words. As students work in their small groups, John confers with students to support them with the task. John closes the period with a whole-group reflection question

about the article, related to his stated focus: “How did the author connect the story together?” Students struggle to answer this question.

## Debrief

After the classroom observation, lab participants move to a separate room to debrief. John is able to join the group, as his principal has arranged for a colleague to cover John’s class for the next 90 minutes.

The debrief begins with reflection, time for participants to review their notes and highlight key practices linked to their focus. Timeri invites the group to do a “quick write” synthesizing their individual thoughts after the observation. Next, participants take turns sharing aloud what they each noticed. Timeri captures these observations by recording them on a chart, so that John may have them to share with his students.



## Noticings from John's Classroom

WHAT We saw and heard.	SO WHAT Why it matters for student understanding.	NOW WHAT The implications for my practice.
"I saw each pair of students reading the assigned article in different ways: some were reading aloud to each other, some were sitting next to each other and annotating as they read silently."	High level of student engagement because students had choice in who their partners were and how they read together.	I need to consider the role of choice when designing my lessons.
"I heard students discussing their background knowledge about the rappers in the article as they identified sign post words, which was the learning target John was aiming for."	It was more interesting for students to study "sign post" (transition) words through the reading of a culturally relevant article than it would be through the reading of a grammar book.	This was an example of discovery learning through mentor texts.
"I heard John say, 'say more about that...' to a student during the reflection at the end of class."	John could have accepted the student's first response, or repeat it, but instead he probed to get the student to say more about her thinking.	Every time a teacher repeats what a student says, the rest of the class learns that they don't have to listen to each other. In this example, John demonstrated interest in hearing the student's idea and pushed the learner to elaborate.

Once everyone has the chance to share what they noticed linked to student understanding, Timeri transitions to asking John specific questions about the lesson. She invites the group to share what they are wondering about at this point in the debrief.

Questions from participants included:

- What do you do to help struggling students?
- How do you differentiate for struggling learners?
- What are the goals of this magazine unit?

- “I am committed to using more open-ended questions to really get my students thinking. Repeating the answers just discourages them from listening to one another.”
- “I want to choose more culturally relevant texts. It was obvious that these students had a lot of background knowledge about the rappers in the article. I see how starting with a more culturally relevant text can be a gateway into helping students begin academic work.”

- “I tend to default to round robin reading, or I read the text aloud to my students. Watching John give the class different options for reading helped me think about other ways to get kids reading that will address diverse learning needs.
- “I am walking away with a newfound appreciation for just how valuable this time is to connect together as colleagues and talk about our work with students. I can’t remember ever being afforded this opportunity.”



John responds to some of the questions, and the group grapples with the issue of differentiation. Finally, participants share their new learning, what they will take away and try from the day:



## ENSURING AUTHENTICITY WITH MINDFUL FACILITATION

A key role of the facilitator is to create and sustain a tone of genuine inquiry. Facilitators begin this process by establishing norms with the group around having honest, open conversations. Honest conversations stem from a place of curiosity, where questions are posed in the spirit of exploration versus advice or judgment. Facilitators share these open questioning techniques and model them throughout the lab process to ensure that all participants' comments remain descriptive and not evaluative. Rather than saying, "I liked how twelve students asked questions," or "I wondered why eighteen students did not ask questions?" facilitators encourage participants to share data free of value judgment, as in, "I counted twelve students who asked questions." Non-judgmental sharing of data grounded in what participants saw or heard leads to rich discussions about why some students may have shared, why others may have chosen not to, and what a teacher might do to encourage all students to participate. These inquiry based conversations offer participants an opportunity to reflect on dilemmas and solutions in their own context and explore new possibilities.

Participants need to feel challenged during a lab and buoyed up by the end. By presenting or responding to data from an inquiry stance, facilitators can uncover participants' beliefs in order to collaboratively explore some of the classroom challenges they each face. Well facilitated Peer Learning Labs are opportunities to uncover and dissect that which disturbs educators about teaching, and to explore together possible solutions to the myriad challenges educators face alone in classrooms every day.

Sometimes lab lessons bomb. Yet with apt facilitation and the support of colleagues, the host teacher is still able to reflect on what didn't work and problem solve with the group. Ultimately, the task of the facilitator is to cultivate space for authentic questioning and rich, reflective dialogue, inspiring teachers to make their thinking public in order to refine their instruction and better promote student learning.

## Follow-Up

The most effective Peer Learning Labs are nestled in inquiry cycles that support ongoing professional learning for all participating teachers. Communication between the Peer Learning Lab facilitator and each participant's instructional coach or administrator will ensure that the Lab experience serves as a

springboard for ongoing professional learning. For example, after participating in John's Peer Learning Lab, some teachers became interested in studying *Reading Don't Fix No Chevys* by Michael Smith and Jeff Wilhelm, as they were curious to investigate the unique reading interests of adolescent boys. Others

were inspired to implement the same curriculum unit that John was implementing, The Magazine Study, to weave more nonfiction into their English classroom. Others were motivated to begin working with Timeri, their instructional coach, to prepare to host Peer Learning Labs in their own classrooms.

## THE HISTORY OF LEARNING LABS

In the mid 1980's, Ellin Keene and Stephanie Harvey developed lab classrooms in Denver area schools as a foundational aspect of their work at the Public Education & Business Coalition. The first lab classrooms were designed as opportunities for teachers to improve their practice by observing more experienced teachers (lab hosts) in action and participate in

structured discussions facilitated by PEBC instructional coaches. These reflective, highly skilled lab hosts acted as "lead learners," experimenting with and modeling research-based instructional practices. Before opening up their classrooms, lab hosts worked closely with a PEBC instructional coach to study pedagogy, test out new ideas in their classrooms, and refine their instruction.

Building off of the tenet, "Seeing is believing," PEBC staff developers Chryse Hutchins, Lori Conrad, Missy Matthews, and Kristin Venable created a lab network to support the development of lab hosts and the use of protocols for learning with and from lab classroom teachers. PEBC continues to offer "expert labs" of this nature as part of their professional development offerings.



In 2002, when Denver Public Schools adopted a new English Language Arts curriculum, PEBC instructional coaches Annie Patterson, Brooke O'Drobinak, and Timeri Tolnay were charged with providing professional development at Lake Middle School to support the new adoption. They were tasked with supporting teachers to implement this new curriculum, and help them figure out how to adapt it to best serve special education students, mainstream learners, gifted and talented children, as well as second language learners. Striving to support teachers in using the district's research-based pedagogy with Lake's largely at-risk student population, the instructional coaches wondered:

- How can we provide teachers time to discuss the challenges

and successes they are experiencing?

- How can we support the implementation of research based instructional practices across the school?
- How can we highlight the classrooms that are making progress with new pedagogy, and make sure that others don't fall too far behind, or continue to do what they have always done at the expense of student learning?

At Lake, the instructional coaches organized and facilitated teachers observing their peers (usually within the same school or professional learning community), and debriefed the observation with a structured, facilitated discussion. First implemented to support the district's new work in English Language Arts at Lake Middle School, the Peer Learning Lab

model soon spread to the Math Department, and eventually was implemented to support all teachers school-wide.

From its beginnings at Lake, Peer Learning Labs spread throughout the city. Denver Public School central administrators implemented Peer Learning Labs to help teachers in a given quadrant of the city share their work and learn from one another. Local private schools, including Arrupe Jesuit High School, adopted the model to support the implementation of shared instructional practices across content areas. Even local colleges and universities got on board: Metropolitan State College of Denver facilitated Peer Learning Labs for teaching credential candidates in the local urban districts where their graduates aspired to work. The University of Colorado at Denver hosted Peer Learning Labs to help

their Master’s level students studying English Language Acquisition. Additionally, Boettcher Teacher Residency, a rigorous preparation model, integrates Peer Learning experiences into its teacher licensure program.

From Denver, Peer Learning Labs as a structure for job-embedded professional learning, spread to other parts of Colorado, and then throughout the nation. Partnering with schools and districts around the country to elevate instructional

practices, PEBC staff developers have brought Peer Learning Labs to schools in California, Kentucky, Wyoming, Washington, D.C. and beyond.



# BENEFITS OF PEER LEARNING LABS

In 2008, the PEBC contracted with the University of Colorado at Denver (UCD) to conduct an evaluation about the effectiveness of PEBC's work in schools. UCD found that Peer Learning Labs made a profound difference in teachers' practice and in students' learning (2008). The teachers in the UCD study reported that as a result of participating in a Peer Learning Lab, they plan as a team, discuss specific strategies in depth, discuss management issues, look at student work together, and share other ideas as well. The Evaluation Center summarized their findings stating, "Key informants provided evidence of the effectiveness of the internal method of professional development to their learning. Factors that contributed to the value of the experiences were thoughtful planning, effective facilitation, and motivated participants. Teachers reported the Peer Learning Lab experience encouraged their implementation of current best practices of instruction and enhanced

collegiality. The lab process was viewed as effective because it facilitates the transfer of best practices from theory to practice and meets both individual teacher and school-wide needs." (Connors, et al., The Evaluation Center UCD, 2008; 27).

One participant commented,

"You're more likely to take suggestions and use them when you have people who are going to hold your feet to the fire because they're your colleagues. It's really easy to leave someplace like a conference and say, 'I'm going to do this,' and then go away and never do it. But right in the building with your colleagues, you're way more likely (to do it)...And if this teacher is having struggles, then you probably are, too. Or, maybe, you've met those struggles and figured out a way to deal with them that the teacher could learn from." (Connors, et al., The Evaluation Center UCD, 2008; 27).

Peer Learning Lab participants, including teachers and administrators, point to the professional learning community as the model that brings teacher learning to life. Learning Labs directly address what matters most in teacher learning, "the effectiveness of sustained, job-embedded, collaborative teacher learning strategies." (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009;48) When asked about the benefits of the internal lab experience, a participant summarized saying, "I think the positives are solidifying the professional relationships with your colleagues, and opening up many more conversations about instruction, about classroom management, about everything." (Connors, et al., The Evaluation Center UCD 2008; 27).



## Peer Learning Labs Enhance the Development of Ongoing Learning Communities

“Peer Learning Labs have been instrumental in shaping my instruction, particularly with regard to the workshop model for the Language Arts classroom.” These are the words of Megen Gillman, a member of the Language Arts department at Skinner Middle School in Denver, Colorado, who collaborated with colleagues in order to develop readers’ and writers’ workshops.

As participants in Professional Learning Communities, teachers engage collaboratively in inquiry based action research to determine a focus area, examine educational research, participate in Peer Learning Labs, discuss their practice, analyze student work, and determine next instructional steps. Research shows that professional learning communities increase educator

effectiveness and enhance student achievement when the learning community is committed to continuous improvement, collective responsibility, and goal alignment. Effective professional learning communities use data from a variety of sources and types of students, educators, and systems to plan, assess and evaluate professional learning.

## Peer Learning Labs Provide Job-embedded Professional Learning Relevant Within the Context of a School or District

“When you watch a lab in your own building, it’s pretty hard to say that an instructional strategy won’t work with our students. They are your kids; this is similar.” (Connors, et al., The Evaluation Center UCD, 2008; 23). This teacher participant in the UCD study reported that observing a lesson taught to a student population that mirrored the learners she works within her

own classroom was a critical element of the experience’s success and transferability.

Kendra Roeder from Pine Bluffs High School in Pine Bluffs, Wyoming explains that labs, “allow us to observe other instructors in the same discipline, especially since we are heading toward the Common Core curriculum and are expected to be

‘on the same page’ within our district.” Through Peer Learning Labs, teachers increase their capacity to actualize district-wide goals at the classroom level; by developing shared understanding and ownership of best practices observed, teachers can then use them to address specific learning needs of the students in their own classrooms.

## Peer Learning Labs Offer Differentiated Professional Learning that Supports Teachers across the Span of their Careers

“Peer Learning Labs create a safe space for reflective practitioners to hone their craft,” says Nicole Veltze, principal of North High School in Denver, Colorado. Each participant in a Peer Learning Lab determines his own observational focus question related to broader goals around elevating

student achievement. Each teacher then observes the host classroom through the lens of her own purpose, shares and discusses her observations and new thinking with the group, makes her own inferences about how to serve learners best, and departs with new ideas for classroom

implementation. As a teacher from Skinner Middle School pointed out, “I can be in the same room with a teacher who’s in their first year teaching and (we’ll) both get a tremendous amount out of the experience.” (Connors, et al., *The Evaluation Center* UCD, 2008; 26).

## Peer Learning Labs Increase Teacher Effectiveness

John Nolan, our lab host in Alameda, California, said, “My experiences with the Peer Learning Labs have made me a more reflective teacher — the protocol of identifying a question while

working with peers through observation and debriefing is especially important to me.” The Peer Learning Lab debrief is designed to support the capacity of colleagues to reflect and

refine their practice as they take on instructional risks to expand their teaching repertoire, enhance their disciplinary expertise and examine student data in light of those changes.

## Peer Learning Labs Heighten a Faculty’s Sense of their own Collective Efficacy

“The conversation following the observation is about our students and how our practice directly impacts their learning. Lab participants walk away with ideas and new practices to implement or adjust immediately,”

describes Michelle Koyama, principal of Denver’s Skinner Middle School. Through their experience with Peer Learning Labs, teachers grow to believe not only that they can make a difference in student understanding, but

also that they can articulate how they do so and which instructional practices matter most. Teachers engaged in meaningful professional relationships that offer them both challenge and support are more likely to feel

satisfied in their role in the classroom, and to continue to grow their instructional practice. Peer Learning Labs provide the critical friends all teachers need to

remain mindful of their own intellectual and professional growth amidst the myriad challenges of working in a school. Teachers involved in hosting Peer Learning

Labs with colleagues strive to address instructional challenges and grow in their confidence and competence, individually, as well as a school community.

Outcomes of Learning Labs	School Culture and Capacity supported by Peer Learning Labs	Alignment with Learning Forward Standards for Professional Learning (2001)	Supporting Research
<p><b>1. Enhanced development of Learning Communities engaged in a continuous cycle of professional development</b></p> <p>“Peer Learning Labs have been instrumental in shaping my instruction, particularly in regard to the workshop model for the Language Arts classroom.”</p> <p>— Megen Gillman, 8th grade teacher, Denver Public Schools</p>	<p><b>Community of Practice focused on individual and collective learning based on on-going assessment and feedback:</b></p> <p>Teachers engage collaboratively in action research through and Inquiry Cycle to: determine a focus area, examine educational research, participate in Peer Learning Labs, discuss practice, analyze student work, and determine next instructional steps.</p>	<p><b>Learning Communities</b></p> <p>Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students occurs within learning communities committed to continuous improvement, collective responsibility, and goal alignment</p> <p><b>Data</b></p> <p>Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students uses a variety of sources and types of student, educator, and system data to plan, assess and evaluate professional learning</p>	<p>DuFour, 2003</p> <p>Little, 1990</p> <p>Elmore, 2000</p> <p>Schmoker, 2011</p> <p>Garmston &amp; Wellman, 1999</p> <p>Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012</p>

Outcomes of Learning Labs	School Culture and Capacity supported by Peer Learning Labs	Alignment with Learning Forward Standards for Professional Learning (2001)	Supporting Research
<p><b>2. Job-Embedded professional learning relevant within the context of a school or district</b></p> <p>“Labs allow us to observe other instructors in the same discipline, especially since we are heading toward the Common Core Curriculum and are expected to be “on the same page” within our district.”</p> <p>— Kendra Roeder, Pine Bluffs High School in Pine Bluffs, Wyoming</p>	<p><b>Community of practice with shared standards and targeted academic foci:</b></p> <p>Teachers actualize district wide goals at the classroom level and develop shared understanding and ownership of best practices that address specific learning needs of the students in their classrooms. The Learning Lab structure provides teachers with the space and time during the school day to focus on achievement which transfers new learning into practice.</p>	<p><b>Resources</b></p> <p>Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students requires prioritizing, monitoring, and coordinating resources for educator learning</p>	<p>Guskey, 2005; Sternin, 2006; Garmston and Wellman, 2012</p>
<p><b>3. Differentiated professional learning that supports teachers across the span of their careers</b></p> <p>“Peer Learning Labs create a safe space for reflective practitioners to hone their craft.”</p> <p>— Nicole Veltze, principal of North High School, Denver, CO</p>	<p><b>Peer Learning Lab Prebrief:</b></p> <p>Each participating teacher determines his or her own observational focus question, related to the school-wide goal. Each teacher then observes the host classroom for a variety of differentiated purposes, and departs with their own instructional take-away to transfer.</p>	<p><b>Learning Designs:</b></p> <p>Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students integrates theories, research, and models of human learning to achieve its intended outcomes.</p>	<p>Easton, 2008; Little, 2003; Bransford, Brown, Cocking, 2000</p>



Outcomes of Learning Labs	School Culture and Capacity supported by Peer Learning Labs	Alignment with Learning Forward Standards for Professional Learning (2001)	Supporting Research
<p><b>4. Increased teacher effectiveness</b></p> <p>“My experiences with the peer learning labs have made me a more reflective teacher -- the protocol of identifying a question while working with peers through observation and debriefing is especially important to me now.”</p> <p>— John Nolan, HS teacher, Alameda, CA</p>	<p><b>Peer Learning Lab Debrief</b></p> <p>Designed to support the capacity of colleagues to reflect and refine their practice as they take on instructional risks to expand their teaching repertoire, enhance their disciplinary expertise and examine student data in light of those changes in practice.</p>	<p><b>Implementation:</b></p> <p>Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students applies research on change and sustains support for implementation of professional learning for long-term change</p>	<p>Dweck, 2006;</p> <p>Goddard, Hoy &amp; Hoy, 2000;</p> <p>Bandura, 1997</p>
<p><b>5. Heighten faculty's sense of collective efficacy</b></p> <p>“The conversation following the observation is about our students and how our practice directly impacts their learning. Lab participants walk away with ideas and new practices to implement or adjust immediately.”</p> <p>Michelle Koyama, Principal</p>	<p><b>Throughout the lab process:</b></p> <p>Teachers not only believe they can make a difference in student understanding, they can articulate how they do it and which instructional practices matter most. As a group, the faculty develops instructional strategies and builds collective efficacy and shared responsibility for student learning.</p>	<p><b>Outcomes</b></p> <p>Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students aligns its outcomes with educator performance and student curriculum standards.</p>	<p>Goddard, Hoy &amp; Hoy, 2000;</p> <p>Garmston &amp; Wellman, 2012</p>

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

Based on the impact of Peer Learning Labs as a catalyst for professional learning, education leaders devoted to teacher learning are well served to implement Labs as a professional development structure for all teachers.

Opening classroom doors is a challenging undertaking that involves some risks, but even greater rewards. Instructional coaches work closely with potential host teachers prior to bringing colleagues into their

classrooms in order to help the hosts reflect and refine their practice. Host teachers need to be able to articulate the intentional instructional shifts they are making and the subsequent impact on student learning. Instructional coaches also must hone their facilitation skills by maintaining group norms to ensure conversation remains focused on learning. In order to create a safe place for teachers to collaborate and improve their practice,

all participants need clarity about what Peer Learning Labs are and what they are not. Anchoring Peer Learning Labs within a shared inquiry around a problem of practice focuses the classroom observation on teacher and student learning, not on evaluation. Inquiry is the essential element: teachers follow their own questions and explore new instructional possibilities to support their students.



# POSSIBLE FOCUS AREAS FOR A PEER LEARNING LAB

- How can we effectively teach argument writing in our classrooms as defined by the Common Core State Standards?
- What are best instructional practices for English Language Learners?
- How do we balance skills and strategy instruction as students grow their understanding of content?
- How can we promote student independence and self-direction?
- What does conferring look and sound like? How can we use this formative assessment practice for differentiation and effective instruction?
- How might we align instructional practices within a school, through a feeder pattern, or across a district?

Peer Learning Labs Are About . . .	Peer Learning Labs Are NOT About . . .
Learning Together	Public Coaching
Valuing shared inquiry-building from a common question of practice	Showcasing an expert
Staying asset based	Evaluating
Improving teacher practice and student learning	Maintaining status quo teaching

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# CONCLUSION

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Teacher Veronica Fiedler at Skinner Middle School described her experience with Peer Learning Labs, “As members of a middle school grade-level team, we had decided we needed to align our classroom rituals and routines to maximize the effectiveness of our practices to help struggling learners access the grade level curriculum. This process started out with discussions and brainstorming ideas, but we soon realized we wanted to experience the classroom context of each of our team members. We decided to use Peer Learning Labs to visit a lesson in each of our team members’ classrooms. The essential questions we used to drive our observations

and our collective vision were the following: What practices are already in place in some or all classrooms that are effective? What student behaviors are we seeing in classrooms that we would like to change? What does the research suggest? What specific practices do we, as a team, need to put into place in each of our classrooms to support student achievement?”

As was the case at Skinner, the Peer Learning Lab structure challenges and supports teachers in finding solutions to problems in their own instructional practice. As participants, educators work collaboratively to observe, study, and determine the most effective responses to

the real challenges they face. Through the structure of Peer Learning Labs, teachers become the drivers of their own learning.

Peer Learning Labs offer a unique window into classrooms, as well as invite deep conversations among educators about their instructional practice. In response to the challenges confronting educators by the new standards and high stakes accountability, Peer Learning Labs offer a time-tested professional learning solution capable of elevating teacher practice and thereby catalyzing student achievement.





“All teachers deserve opportunities to view the intricacies of teaching when they are not the center of attention. Visiting another teacher’s room allows you the luxury of driving in the slow lane, stopping to see the big picture as you take notes, jot questions, and think about children other than your own. Not only does the visitor learn, but the host as well.”

Shelly Harwayne, *Lifetime Guarantees*, (p. 223, 2000)

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