

Engaging in Cycles of Strategic Observation and Reflection

FOCUS QUESTIONS

- What conditions are necessary in a school or district to drive continuous improvement in teaching and learning?
- How can a school cultivate learning communities where teachers, coaches, and instructional leaders engage together in cycles of strategic observation and reflection to drive improvements in teaching and learning?
- How can a district create the conditions necessary for supporting professional growth of teachers to improve teaching and learning?

Building a Culture of Professional Growth

We know that when it comes to the academic achievement of students, among school-related factors, teaching matters most. Therefore, it is imperative that schools and districts understand that supporting teachers' professional growth must be one of their highest priorities and that effective professional-growth experiences require much more than a one- or two-day seminar. All professional-growth initiatives within a district should be built on three key principles: ¹

- Focus on the teaching practices that we know drive learning for all students
- Cultivate learning communities where teachers, coaches, and instructional leaders engage together in cycles of **strategic observation and reflection** to drive improvements in teaching and learning
- Create the conditions necessary for supporting professional growth of teachers and building instructional capacity

The success of professional-growth initiatives depends on school and district leadership embracing these principles and ensuring they are the focus of those participating in these initiatives. Louis et al. ² defined 'leadership' as "establishing agreed-upon and worthwhile directions for the organization...and doing whatever it takes to prod and support people to move in those directions." In the executive summary of their report, Wahlstrom, Louis, Leithwood, and Anderson ³ concluded that "leadership effects on student learning occur largely because leadership strengthens professional community; teachers' engagement in professional community, in turn, fosters the use of instructional practices that are associated with student achievement." One large urban district in California illustrates how district leadership enacted these principles to implement the **SOAR Teaching Frames**[®] for Literacy.

Supporting Professional Growth in a Large Urban School District ⁴

Context: Among the largest in the nation, the South End School District (pseudonym) is a diverse, urban district serving a high proportion of English learners (ELs) with 36 percent currently classified as EL.

SESD's Journey: The District's journey began with SESD teachers and coaches enrolling in a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) developed by Stanford University in collaboration with REEd at the University of California, Davis. The MOOC focused on a common vision of instruction targeting the needs of ELs and appealed to district administrators who were interested in fostering professional growth across the district to implement the California ELA/ELD framework. The charge for the cross-role district design team was to implement the ELD standards in tandem with the California Content Standards. Their approach to this was to:

- establish and expand collaboration;
- develop resources;
- align curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

"Our story began with a desire to move action research into classroom practice with the aim of improving instruction for English learners. We wanted to build the capacity in the district to meet the needs of our EL students and to focus on language as a driver for content learning."—Design Team quote

Together, SESD teachers and coaches engaged in professional learning through participation in the MOOC, and in spring of 2016 they worked with REEd to develop and implement a **SOAR** fellowship, i.e., professional learning program. The program was implemented with 70 district administrators over five Fridays and with 100 teacher-principal pairs over five Saturdays.

Drivers for Change: The SESD design team wanted to implement a common vision of instruction that would drive learning as articulated in the CA ELA/ELD framework and would also prioritize the importance of language for learning. They selected the **SOAR** Teaching Frames as their shared set of high impact instructional practices.

*"We now have a tool [**SOAR**] that will help us to implement the teaching and learning framework. It will help us to be better observers and to give stronger feedback to our teachers. The rubrics will help teachers plan instruction and I can see how **SOAR** will help the district to foster teacher growth."—Design Team quote*

Once the team made the decision to focus work on the **SOAR** teaching practices, they began to determine how best to develop the professional capital needed for ongoing facilitation of professional growth around those practices. They developed curriculum support materials and unit plans aligned with the practices for different grade spans. In addition, they developed a suite of videos and online tools to support this work. They had principal and teacher pairs from schools within each local district participate in a **SOAR** fellowship program, and they also had district administrators and Title III coaches participate in their own **SOAR** professional learning to prepare them to support teachers' implementation of the **SOAR** practices.

*"We need to be all learning together, so we want to build the knowledge and skills of teachers, coaches and administrators together. We've done professional development around constructive conversations and we know that speaking and listening around the content area is important. **SOAR** furthers that work and will benefit my staff and it will benefit every child in my school—not just the ELs—every student."—Administrator quote*

The SEDS design team understood the importance of building a professional culture that would promote ongoing collaboration and feedback. They recognized that this professional culture included building relationships internally and also with external partners.

“We see the importance of building relationships to facilitate this work. We have focused on building teacher-principal reflective teams, relationships among administrators across different departments within SEDS, and building relationships with university intermediaries as we co-develop the professional growth work.”—Design Team quote

They focused time on building a community of trust and strengthening relationships between and among teachers, administrators, management, and labor. They also recognized the importance of structuring the collaboration to allow teachers and leaders to have an equal voice.

*“We see the importance of bringing in teacher-principal pairs to learn about **SOAR** together as reflective partners in the work. Working in reflective pairs, teachers and principals have had the same learning. They can see together what they need to strengthen and it also helps principals to think about how to provide the best support for teachers.”—Design Team quote*

The SEDS team put a number of new structures in place to facilitate peer-peer collaboration and feedback using the **SOAR** frames. These structures were designed to foster ongoing professional dialogue about instructional improvement. For example, they implemented the **SOAR** fellowship program, a coach book study, and cross-role district administrator teams. The SEDS case illustrates the importance of the three principles mentioned above, both in terms of their importance as individual drivers of change, and also in terms of their interconnectedness.

Professional-Learning Communities

One approach to establishing and sustaining a professional-growth model illustrated by the SEDS case is to cultivate professional-learning communities (PLCs) at each school site. This type of professional-growth initiative at the school level requires the same commitment to building trust, instructional capacity, and professional relationships that existed at the district and school level in SEDS. In other words, PLCs requires a commitment to providing a laser-like focus for instructional improvement, cultivating teacher leadership as a driver of instructional change, and creating the conditions necessary for continuous improvement in teaching and learning.

A PLC is not a program but a continuous process in which “educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve.”⁵ Research clearly shows that the most significant impact on school improvement and student achievement happens when school personnel function as a PLC,⁶ as long as the PLC is truly designed to foster collaborative discussions about teaching and learning. Therefore, for a PLC to be effective, teachers, coaches, and administrators all need to use a common language to discuss teaching practice and collaborate around student achievement.

One essential component of effective collaboration is establishing a shared vision for teaching and learning. Colleagues enact this shared vision and work interdependently, while leadership creates new structures and approaches for working together that are focused on the continuous improvement of teaching practices and student learning. They make adjustments to instruction based on shared data and are guided by key questions: *What is working and for whom? What do we need to do for those who aren’t getting it?*

Inquiry Questions: PLCs are data driven. To maintain a laser-like focus on the instructional practices articulated in a **SOAR** Teaching Frame®, data is examined through the lens of inquiry questions that are derived from these guiding questions:

- What do we expect students to learn?
- How will we know when they have learned it?
- How will we respond when they don't learn?
- How will we respond when they already know it?
- How will we adjust our instruction in response to their learning?

Addressing the first guiding question involves establishing learning targets that are aligned with the CCSS and the target High-Impact Practice. Next, PLC participants consider “How will we know when they have learned it?” In other words, how will students demonstrate their new knowledge and skills, and what type of data (e.g., written work, transcripts, anecdotal evidence, or video) will provide evidence of student learning? Participants must also decide when they will collect data (e.g., tomorrow, next week, or within a two-week window) and how much will be collected (e.g., a snapshot of two students, multiple groups, whole class, or targeted students). Next, participants use the **SOAR** lens to determine what instructional experiences or tasks, aligned with the **SOAR** practices, will help students achieve the outcome(s). Finally, participants decide how they will gather evidence of implementation of the **SOAR** practices. Based on these discussions, the group develops an inquiry question. (See template on page 121.)

In a PLC focused on the *Disciplinary Discussions Teaching Frame*, the question “What do we expect students to learn?” leads to an examination of what teachers already know about how their students engage in disciplinary discussions and how they can foster disciplinary discourse to deepen student knowledge. This in turn could lead to the outcome “We want students to improve their skills in building on partner ideas,” a learning target that emerges logically from the practices within the frame.

That statement could be turned into the inquiry question “How can we improve students’ skill of staying on topic?” Teachers would then determine what evidence would indicate student success. For instance, the evidence could be this: “We will assess two sets of students using transcripts of their conversations.” Finally, teachers use the **SOAR** lens to plan a set of lessons and decide what strategies they would all use to support student learning—more specifically, what instructional tasks and strategies best address the **SOAR** Teaching Frame®. For example, “We will use a model and nonmodel. We will use talking chips. We will use response cards to help those students who need extra support. We will use the *Disciplinary Discussions* conversation posters and prompt and response starters.”

The inquiry question, together with looking at teaching through the lens of the **SOAR** Teaching Frame® and Guiding Questions, is what keeps the PLC focused on improving implementation of the **SOAR** instructional practices. The PLC participants continually address the question, tweak it as necessary, and once mastery is met, develop a new inquiry question.

Additional SOAR Resources: Improvement of teaching practice through a PLC also relies on teachers and instructional leaders using common language to discuss teaching practices and make suggestions for improvement. This common language should be aligned to those teaching practices that we know drive student learning. So, the **SOAR** Teaching Frames®, Guiding Questions, and rubrics are excellent tools to facilitate dialogue about teaching and learning that fosters professional growth. For example, after teaching

a lesson, teachers can look at the **SOAR** Guiding Questions and see where they believe their lessons could be enhanced. They could reflect by talking with peers about the evidence, what made the lesson strong, and areas in which they could improve. Teachers can also share videos of their teaching with peers in the PLC setting.

Another approach is to use the **SOAR** Guiding Questions to collaboratively develop lesson plans, keeping the language of the **SOAR** Teaching Frames® in mind. Teachers could discuss ways a lesson could be revised and refined in order to strengthen that lesson. An alternative approach would be to ask a peer or principal to watch a lesson and then discuss the evidence together, collaboratively brainstorming areas for improvement. As a team, teachers can look at and identify where the questions are addressed in a lesson and where the lesson can be improved. This will deepen the teachers' understanding of the **SOAR** Teaching Frame® and instructional practices, as well as help teachers see how they can be integrated into a lesson plan. The following vignette describes how one school used the **SOAR** Teaching Frames® and instructional resources to foster professional growth within a PLC structure.

Rockville School

Rockville School is in transition. They have a new principal, who understands the necessity of building relationships and creating a collaborative culture. This is a school that has had very little professional development over the years. Teachers worked independently, and grade levels had no real understanding of who was teaching what. In his first year, the principal implemented a two-day professional learning around the **SOAR** *Disciplinary Discussions Teaching Frame*. During the professional learning, teachers had time to collaborate and talk about what they could do to get their migrant population of students engaged in more disciplinary discussions. They also had opportunities to unpack the language of the teaching practices and view video examples of these practices in action. The principal shared his belief that if students were engaged in deeper discussions, they would improve their academic language, deepen their content knowledge by co-constructing meaning, and be more engaged in learning. The school already had established early release days throughout the year. The expectation was that teachers and the administrators would meet once a month on those days in the library to work in PLCs to extend their learning and develop a culture of collaboration.

At the first PLC of the year, teachers discussed what the indicators of successful collaboration would be. They also reviewed five guiding questions:

- 1) What do we expect students to learn?
- 2) How will we know when they have learned it?
- 3) How will we respond when they don't learn?
- 4) How will we respond when they already know it?
- 5) How will we adjust our instruction in response to their learning?

Then, the teachers agreed to a set of norms, developed their inquiry question around the targeted teaching frame using the template provided by the facilitator, and created an agenda for the next meeting. (See agenda template on page 122.) The inquiry question they developed was "How do we facilitate lengthier and more authentic discussions between students that demonstrate critical thinking and processing?" Teachers came to consensus regarding the student data they would collect, planned lessons using the **SOAR** Guiding Questions,

and selected the instructional strategies they would use in those lessons. These professional conversations were very powerful as participants began to share different ideas on how to engage their students in discussions guided by the language in the **SOAR** Teaching Frames® and Guiding Questions. The principal shared what he had seen as he visited classrooms.

Teachers began the second PLC by discussing their inquiry question and looking at student data and evidence of teaching through the **SOAR** lens. All the grade levels decided to use transcripts from three sets of students before they began focusing on student discussions as baseline data. Then they began reflecting on their teaching and using the **SOAR** Teaching Frame® to analyze areas that could be strengthened. They discussed concerns for those students who were reluctant to talk. Teachers asked one another how they introduced the conversation skills. Others shared how they started with baby steps, just giving their students one response question, such as “Can you tell me more?” There was energy in the room as teachers nodded their heads and asked one another clarifying questions. Teachers decided that they needed to spend more time focusing on facilitating students’ use of appropriate academic language to engage in the conversation and they discussed additional sentence frames and support they could provide to students. They collaboratively used the **SOAR** Guiding Questions to develop the next lesson they would implement.

Across the school year, teachers and instructional leaders engaged in strategic cycles of inquiry. They engaged in peer-peer observations and self-reflection using the **SOAR** Teaching Frames®, Guiding Questions, and rubrics. Teachers video-recorded lessons and uploaded them to an online platform where coaches could access the videos and provide feedback through the lens of the **SOAR** tools, using the rubrics as evidence of current instruction and the Guiding Questions to give feedback on how to enhance lessons. During subsequent PLC sessions, teachers, coaches, and administrators debriefed this process, shared video examples, and also discussed improvements and adjustments they had made to move from one level of teaching to the next for all practices in the frame. In addition, they tracked changes they were seeing in student disciplinary discussions.

Conclusion

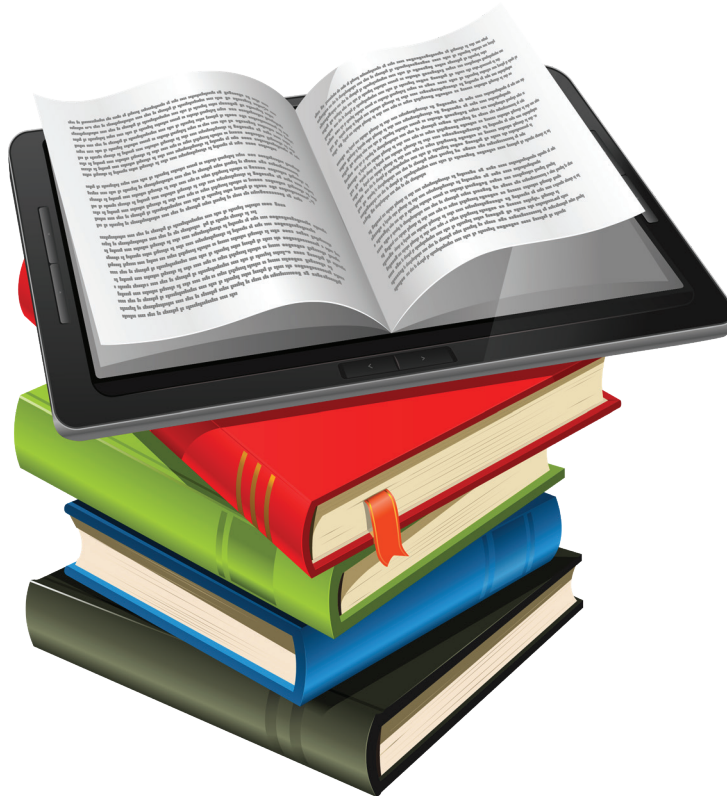
To be effective, professional learning needs to be grounded in the day-to-day practice of teaching where teachers assess, reflect, and collaboratively find solutions through strategic cycles of continuous improvement. There needs to be a collective focus on, and commitment to, the learning of each and every student. When the expectation is on all teachers to collaborate at this level, we see a profound impact on the structure and culture of the school, and on student outcomes. The examples we have shared in this chapter demonstrate how **SOAR** Teaching Frames® and associated tools can be systematically applied to support the professional growth of teachers and improve student achievement.



Chapter 6 - Footnotes

1. O'Hara, S., & Pritchard, R. (2016). Framing teaching for common core literacy standards: SOAR Teaching Frames for literacy. *Psychology Research, 6*(2), 92–101. doi:10.17265/2159-5542/2016.02.004.
2. Louis, K. S., Leithwood, K., Wahlstrom, K., Anderson, S., Michlin, M., & Mascall, B. (2010). *Learning from leadership: Investigating the links to improved student learning. Final report of research*. St. Paul, MN: Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement, University of Minnesota & Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto.
3. Wahlstrom, K., Louis, K. S., Leithwood, K., & Anderson, S. (2010). *Learning from leadership: Investigating the links to improved student learning. Executive summary of research findings*. St. Paul, MN: Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement, University of Minnesota & Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto.
4. Resourcing Excellence in Education (REEd) IPLS Report. (2016). *Moving California toward a statewide model for professional growth that prioritizes teaching*. University of California, Davis.
5. DuFour R, DuFour R, Eaker, R, & Many, T. (2006). *Learning by doing: A handbook for professional learning communities at work*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree USA.
6. Fullan, M. (2005). Professional learning communities writ large. In R. DuFour, R. Eaker, & R. DuFour (Eds.), *On common ground: The power of professional learning communities* (pp. 209–223). Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.

Resources



Write an Inquiry Question

Question	Response
<p>What do we want students to know and be able to do?</p>	
<p>How will we know? What evidence will we use to determine they met the learning target?</p>	
<p>Which SOAR practice do we need to improve to help students reach the learning target? Which activities, strategies, and resources will we use to improve?</p>	

PLC Agenda

PLC Team: Meeting Time:	Meeting Date: Meeting Location:
Members present:	Members absent:
Team Norms:	
School Goal:	
Team Goal:	
Inquiry question:	
Discussion and Plans:	
Unanswered Questions:	Next meeting: Agenda items: