



K20 IDEALS

Discourse

Introduction

Discourse is a key element of the learning process that occurs when we can all come together in safe spaces to engage in intentional conversation. When students and teachers engage in discourse, we are able to identify, understand, and develop practical actions designed to address and resolve problems. Discourse requires sharing and examining practices systematically in order to ensure a continuous cycle of improvement, bringing the focus on how we can all promote solutions. Developing an effective discourse system is a complex process that can establish and sustain a robust learning community.

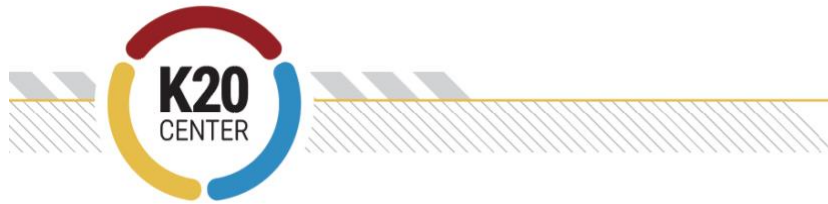
Themes of Discourse

High-Trust Community

Trust is a vital component in promoting discourse. It enables us to cultivate a community of collaboration that involves our students. Although building trust can be challenging, it is a vital component in working to address achievement gaps among a diverse student body. This focus on trust serves as a great first step toward broadly engaging others in the decision-making process. When teachers focus on their roles and responsibilities to meet testing mandates and other data-driven outcomes, engaging in interdisciplinary collaboration to develop communities of practice becomes more significant. It can be easy sometimes to find ourselves working in isolation as we focus on standards-based mandates. This shift toward discourse enables us to engage others in a process that helps to integrate students into that learning community.

Effective discourse requires meeting the following conditions:

- Ensuring that all stakeholders feel as if they are regarded as valuable members of a high-trust community, and all perspectives are represented and honored.
- Shifting the mindset from deficit-based practices—where assessment focuses on what is missing or what is wrong—to asset-based practices—where assessment focuses on and builds up positive aspects.



- Giving voice to all stakeholders, including community members, students, families, teachers, school leaders, and students—among these, it is most important to ensure students have a voice in the dialogue about processes.
- Promoting a sense of belonging and creating relationships that include frequent interactions and sustain positive momentum.

Critical Reflection on Instructional Practices

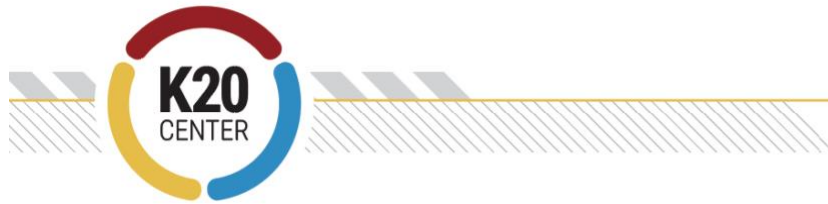
Since teachers are often pressed for time in their day-to-day practice, exploring new strategies can be a challenge. Engaging in discourse provides opportunities to reflect on instructional practices as part of a collaborative group rather than in isolation. Reflecting in this way also enables us to consider the holistic well-being of students as we work toward more equitable practices and decision-making. Engaging a diverse group of stakeholders helps us to think creatively and open up to new ideas, enabling us to question what we are measuring and how it is being measured. How we answer these questions requires us to rethink our instructional practices.

Reflection must also consider instruction that enables teachers to adjust and differentiate based on diverse student needs. Culturally responsive pedagogy is an important consideration because such pedagogy requires thinking about how systemic inequities impact learning and access to information. Because this process requires teachers to evaluate their own practices and engage in data inquiry, they participate in ongoing transformative professional development, intentionally designed to continuously improve their practice. This process is bolstered when informed by a model that makes theories of action visible and explicit, when the reflection process is documented, and when a structure is in place that promotes research in order to tailor teaching practice to specific contexts or settings.

Professional Conversations

Effective discourse is professional in nature. This means that conversations move beyond casual social conventions to reflect shared experiences, and this supports the expansion of knowledge to create a community of practice. Through collaborative relationships, the community of practice can address common and group goals. New ideas and visions for professional development and peer mentoring often emerge from communities of practice informed by professional conversations.

These conversations have the potential to enhance the competencies of community members and other practitioners. To achieve the goals outlined within a community of practice, the community's professional conversations need to construct, interrogate, and challenge



knowledge, identities, and realities with all community members participating equally and fully in the process.

These conversations have the potential to enhance the competencies of community members and other practitioners. To promote sustainability and maintain momentum in efforts directed at continuous improvement, the rules for promoting high-trust communities still hold.

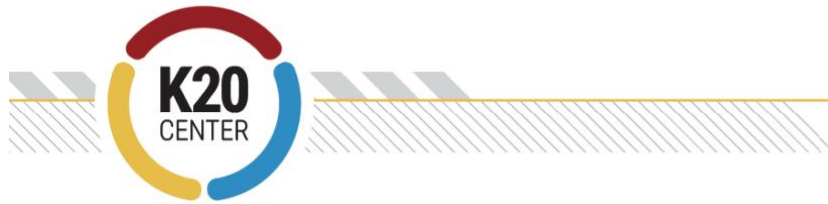
Inquiry must inform these conversations. The inquiry process provides important contextual clues about needs. While including data and data analysis is not the primary goal of discourse, these data inform teachers about the progress of their students. These data help communities set goals and provide the community with a means for assessing whether expectations are being met. Inquiry involves conversations about data and policies that are informed by engaged research. This engaged research, then, enhances community members' understanding of strengths and limitations in terms of achieving goals and meeting expectations.

Discourse in Practice

As teachers, we serve an instrumental role in sustaining momentum and providing daily insight about successes and growth opportunities by applying new approaches for promoting student well-being. Engaging in sustainable and high-quality instructional practices, along with active participation in a high-trust community, creates a foundation for teachers to successfully integrate discourse into the classroom. With support from educational leaders and the necessary resources to accomplish these objectives, teachers can be ready to face any challenges that might arise as they put the research into practice.

This process does not equate learning with results from standardized achievement tests. Reflection must also consider instruction that enables teachers to adjust and differentiate based on student needs. Because this process makes teachers party to the evaluation of their own practices, they are engaged in what is considered transformative continuing professional development, which is designed to continuously improve their practice. This process is bolstered when informed by a model that makes theories of action visible and explicit, when the reflection process is documented, and when a structure is in place that examines how to tailor research to specific contexts or settings. Examples of putting discourse into practice might include:

- Creating a safe place for discourse by establishing participant-defined norms. As long as participants know and respect these norms, they can engage on a level playing field and know their voices will be heard. Established norms should emphasize the importance of the free flow of ideas about the nature of problems and solutions that may best address



them. All should be invited to participate in discussions without concern for criticism or censure.

- Engaging in active reflection across roles. Educational leaders should encourage the process of inquiry and reflection about instructional practices. Educational leaders must provide teachers with the resources to examine the inequities that students face daily. Teachers must be willing to make appropriate changes.
- Constructing, interrogating, and challenging the community's professional conversations in order to achieve the goals outlined within a community of practice. The community's identities and realities should be examined with all community members participating equally and fully in the process.

Conclusion

Improved educational outcomes *can* become a reality when diverse stakeholders come together in communities of practice. The stakeholders share their expertise to identify issues of concern and develop strategies to address these issues and achieve common goals. *Can* is the operative word, however, because in the absence of protected time and space for community members to engage in reflection, critical conversations, and challenging of assumptions, the status quo will be maintained and the same issues will persist.

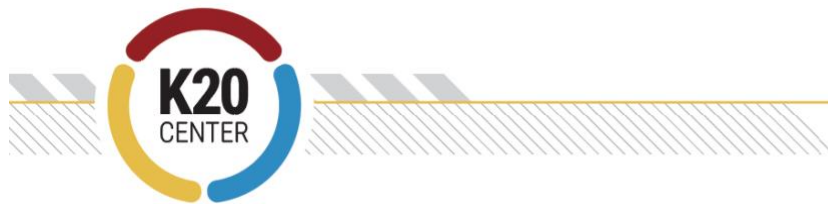
Beyond simply making sure that professional conversations occur within communities of practice with diverse expertise, it is also essential that norms and procedures be established for ensuring that the voices of all are heard in a collaborative environment. The evaluation process is a requirement to understand the cultural context clues from students and families. These procedures can provide critical insights into mechanisms to promote success and failure when trying to meet student needs and promote student well-being.

Discourse brings participants together in a high-trust community to engage in critical reflection and discussion examining instructional practices in a continuous cycle of improvement to promote equity for all learners.

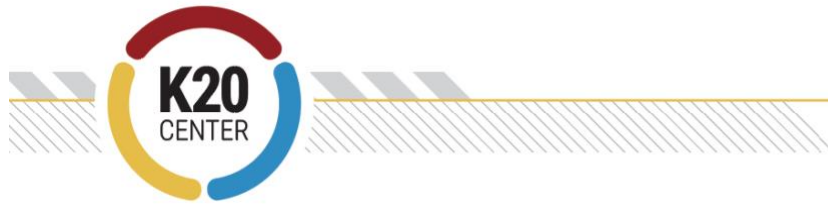
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