Supporting School Development
Tips & Techniques

The following document comprises a number of creative ideas as shared by members of the South African Extraoridnary Schools Coalition.
Herein, you will find:

- A description of the School Peer Review process;
- Inventive ways to use 'Meeting Circles';
- Insights into the nature of communication in the age of social media;
- Innovative approaches to teaching maths and science;
- Some useful 'team teaching' methods and;
- 6 effective reading strategies to encourage learners to engage with text.

01

School Peer Review & School Improvement Plan

Hassiena Marriott described the SCHOOL PEER REVIEW process for improving teaching practice in Coalition schools. It involves a team of teachers and management from a number of Coalition schools visiting a particular school to conduct focus groups with the principal, management team, teachers, parents and sometimes learners.

The review highlights what the school is doing well, identifies issues (such as littering or excessive noise levels) that can fairly easily and quickly be improved by taking straightforward action, as well as issues (such as too much chalk-and-talk) that are more deeply problematic and can only be addressed through fundamental change, and makes recommendations. The information collected is compiled into an evidence-based report.

The reviewed school then sets up a team to respond to the evaluation. This, starting with an appreciation of what the school is doing well, addresses the identified problem areas and leads to the development of a SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PLAN.

Judy Tate described the Inanda Seminary's innovative use of 'MEETING CIRCLES' to foster open communication and creative thinking in a variety of settings and for a variety of purposes, from routine management to problem-solving, mentoring, academic intervention and learner discipline. Each circle has a clear directive, so staff could belong to number of different circles, and parents or learners could be included when appropriate.

Circles use a number of tools to promote participation including circular seating, collaborative agenda-setting, facilitation/mediation, de Bono thinking caps, check-ins, shout-outs (giving both positive feedback and constructive criticism), and breaking onto smaller circles.
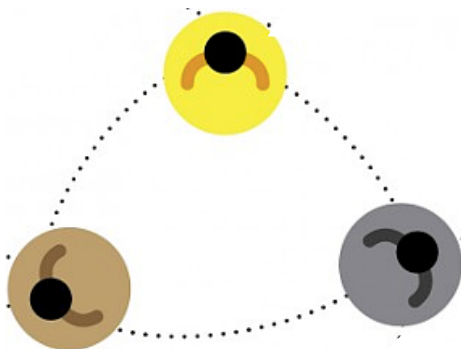
The collaborative circle model has been successful in engendering honest engagement in dealing with issues, uncovering underlying causes of problems, and generating and sharing creative solutions and ideas going forward.

Using Meeting Circles In Schools
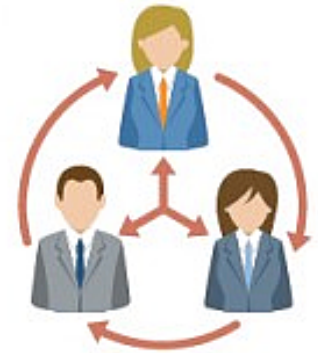
Connecting In the 21st Century

Craig Johnson shared a number of insights on the nature of communication in the age of social media and electronics, and the implications of these for designing, accessing, storing and sharing resources – especially knowledge resources used for teaching and learning.

What are the different methods of electronic communication? When is face-to-face communication more appropriate? What makes a relationship authentic, when people who have never met may interact online several times every day? What are the challenges in South Africa where data coverage, especially in rural areas, is limited and where many people who do have electronic devices don't use them to their full potential?

The changed methods of communicating and interacting with information have led to improved access to teaching and learning resources, collaboration and teaching practice. A key consideration is that today's learners engage very differently with material than learners of even 10 or 15 years ago did, and we have to find ways of engaging them that keep their attention and facilitate their learning.

04

Re-Shaping the Way We Teach Maths & Science

John Gilmour involved participants in a number of activities that explored innovative approaches to teaching maths and science. An exercise relating to identifying challenges that children face when learning maths and science showed how children may learn better from their own explanations than from listening to the teacher unpacking a concept over and over.

Participants were also introduced to a polarisation exercise which they could use in their own classrooms. This involved initial yes/no answers followed by further unpacking using 'opinion questions' to explore the concepts and enable learning to take place.

Other tips about teaching maths and science included teaching principles in terms of their contexts, avoiding placing time pressure or limitations on teaching maths concepts, allowing learners to make mistakes as a means of learning, and introducing concepts in terms of their practical real-world application before defining them.

05

Professional Development Through Team Teaching

Nigel Richard led a brainstorming session to explore team teaching approaches. Some ideas included one teacher teaching a lesson with the other teacher giving individual learners support as needed; one teacher providing instruction after which both teachers move around the class monitoring activities and answering questions; alternating teaching and observing roles; dividing the class into two groups with each teacher teaching a different aspect of the lesson and then switching groups; and setting up 4 differentiated stations with the junior teacher taking the easier station, the more experienced teacher tackling the higher order station, and the other 2 stations involved in peer or technology-based learning.

The group's questions and comments on team teaching covered the economic implications of having two teachers in one class; team teaching in relation to the mentee/mentor situation; power dynamics and collaboration to avoid inequality; and the potential for improving content and pedagogical knowledge.

Noloyiso Lange led a discussion on using THE SUPER SIX READING STRATEGIES to encourage and assist learners to engage with and find meaning in text. The strategies include getting learners to: put themselves in similar situations and make real-life connections with the text; use textual and graphic clues to anticipate developments and refine their understanding; ask and then answer questions to clarify meaning and deepen their understanding; and create mental pictures to bring text to life and enhance learning by incorporating additional senses. Also included are ways of getting back on track when meaning is disrupted, and identifying, assembling and re-stating the important ideas.

The conversation was broadened to include issues that teachers struggle with such as the difficulty of explaining when learners' level of understanding is low, and ways of measuring understanding without using tests. Participant questions about questioning techniques led to emphasis on the importance of using Bloom's taxonomy to structure questions, encouraging learners with prompts such as 'say more' and affirming responses to build learners' confidence.

Sharing Instructional Best Practice Ideas