

DOORS OPEN

HOW INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS CAN IMPROVE
THROUGH ENCOURAGING A CULTURE OF

collaboration

BY ALEXIS WIGGINS

Consider the following two high school teaching scenarios, and tell me which one most closely resembles your experience:

First Scenario

Four 11th grade English teachers meet weekly during a common free period. During this time, they discuss the text their classes are working on: *Death of a Salesman*. Janice runs the meeting this week and Alice takes minutes on her laptop. Afterwards, Alice will post the minutes to the English department folder so the department chair can peruse them in the coming days and respond to any issues or questions that arise.

Janice asks her colleagues how far along in the text they are, and all teachers look at their calendars and schedules to determine when the best week for all classes to finish would be. Since Amy and Janice teach honors sections, they agree to end a week earlier to leave time for an additional assessment. Then all four teachers begin to discuss what the end-of-text assessment should be this time around. An in-class essay with a prompt? A comparison essay asking students to compare and contrast *Death of a Salesman* with *The Great Gatsby*? Perhaps something different this time: the creation of a visual representation (drawing, collage, digital graphic, film, etc.) that expresses a key insight from the text, presented orally to the class in three minutes or less. Yes, they all agree, this has worked well in the past and they'd like to do it again.

Now discussion ensues on how to assess this project: should artistic ability count? No, they decide. The purpose of the visual is to convey a profound insight and it will not be assessed for artistic merit. Should they assess for presentation skills in the students' explanation of their visuals? Yes. This is a chance for key feedback for students leading up to their Independent Oral Presentations, a requirement for all juniors.

Now that the four teachers have agreed on the assignment and how to assess for it, Amy offers to draw up a draft of a student assignment sheet that she'll email to her colleagues in the coming week. On one side, the assignment sheet will have the explanation of the assignment with several examples of how students might approach this particular assessment. On the reverse side will be a rubric with two criteria: *Understanding and Interpretation* (of the text in relation to the visual) and *Presentation Skills*. Amy will be able to draw this up in a half hour or less, since it's only a matter of accessing the rubric bank in the English department folder and tweaking a rubric from a similar assignment from last year.

With the planning for the *Death of a Salesman* unit finalized, Alice asks if there is time to "group grade" an essay by a student of hers. The student received a B on her *Gatsby* paper and believed that it should be higher. Alice gave her the standard reply: "OK, I'll ask the 11th grade team to assess it and if they agree it's better than a B, I'll change it." As the other teachers scan the paper one by one, making notes and giving a quick assessment according to the rubric specific to that assignment, Alice gets the feedback she needs: the others agree a B is about right, though a couple of her colleagues actually think a B- would be more appropriate. Now she can go back to the student with this information and let the student know the result: the grade will stand.

Janice reminds them that the next item on the agenda for the day is to discuss peer observation. The teach-



WHEN I MOVED BACK TO THE U.S. A FEW YEARS LATER, I WAS SO USED TO WORKING IN THIS WAY (*first scenario*) THAT I FELT NOTHING SHORT OF SHOCK WHEN I BEGAN MY NEW JOB AT AN INDEPENDENT SCHOOL.

ers have been paired up for the year to engage in multiple sessions of peer observation and feedback. The purpose is to see what colleagues are doing in their respective classrooms and receive valuable feedback in an informal way (as opposed to observation and feedback from a superior). The teachers compare schedules to set times for this.

With only a few minutes left to the meeting, discussion turns to what's working in Alice's class as she describes an approach to using reading journals that none of her colleagues has heard of before. Her colleagues are intrigued and ask her to send some samples via email, and she agrees.

The bell rings, and the teachers gather their notes and hurry off to their next class.

Second Scenario

Four 11th grade teachers are all teaching the same text, *Death of a Salesman*. Each teacher defines the pace, focus, assignments, and major assessments on his or her own. Sarah has heard a few interesting things (and some not-so-interesting ones) that her colleagues are doing in their sections, but she prefers to run her section her way. She enjoys the autonomy and believes

her students are learning a lot. She wonders what the unit's final assessment should be....

TOWARD A COLLABORATIVE CULTURE

While there is a great variety of independent schools out there, I'm willing to bet the vast majority of independent school teachers find themselves more closely identifying with the second scenario. I know independent schools intimately. I was the child of two independent school teachers and I've worked at four independent schools myself. But I also have had the opportunity to teach in international schools in Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, and it was in these settings that I learned how to teach most effectively.

The first scenario is not a fictional ideal; it's an exact description of my experience teaching in international schools. The ones I have worked in are dynamic, collaborative, innovative places in which I was constantly having to "raise my game" because I was exposed to all the wonderful things my colleagues were doing in the classroom.

My first real teaching job was in a New England boarding school, where I was given my teaching assignments and a pile of books. That was it. Every-

thing else was up to me. My next job was at an American international school in Hong Kong, where I encountered a large group of colleagues who had Master's degrees in education (something I'd always sniffed at) and a culture of openness, collaboration, team-teaching, standards, and rubrics. As I began to immerse myself in this kind of culture, I found myself asking, *Why didn't we use rubrics for every assignment at my old school? Doing so just makes sense.... Why did we all teach in isolation and never know what our colleagues were doing, even when teaching the same course? Why did we never stop to ask how students learn best and what course design was the most equitable?* It was a hugely challenging and rewarding year, and I learned more in that year than I did in the several years I taught before.

When I moved back to the U.S. a few years later, I was so used to working in this way (first scenario) that I felt nothing short of shock when I began my new job at an independent school. We had a weekly department meeting that never seemed to have a clear sense of purpose. Nearly all the teachers worked inside their offices, doors closed, huddled over their laptops. When we did meet in grade-level teams

(a rare occasion), I got the distinct feeling that it was more of a competition than collaboration. One colleague spoke of an innovative approach to teaching grammar she'd developed over the summer. When asked if she might share it with us, she seemed put-off — as if she had done all the work and now we wanted to share in the spoils. No one visited colleagues' classrooms to see what they might learn, and we never "group graded" papers to see if we were on the same page in assessing them. I basically had no idea what other people were doing in their classes. It wasn't that my colleagues were so different from the ones in Hong Kong; they were all highly educated, experienced, and motivated high school teachers. But the *cultures* of the schools were night and day. The international school culture that I knew was one that valued collaboration, transparency, and equitability. Its motto might be: *Constantly reassessing so that we may improve.* The independent school culture is one that values faculty's knowledge and passion in closed-door classrooms. Its motto might be: *Trust us, we know what we're doing.*

I think we can — and must — do better. Independent schools pride themselves on providing a top-notch

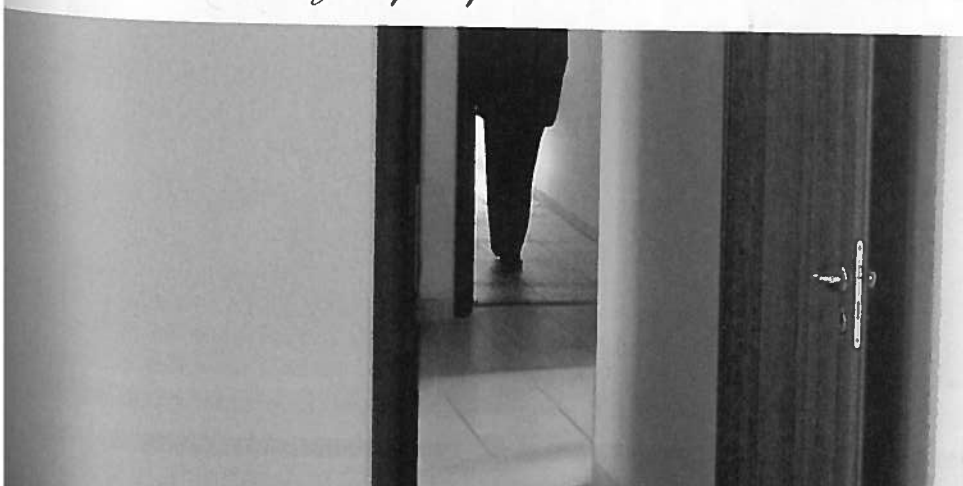
education, but the dirty secret is that they often produce smart, interesting, capable students because they admit smart, interesting, capable students. It isn't enough to be a passionate, knowledgeable teacher. There are very knowledgeable and passionate teachers who aren't actually effective at helping students learn. We need to constantly think about the quality of education we're providing overall, not just what we are each doing in our classrooms.

To look at it from one perspective, imagine twins, Mike and Jason, attending the same independent school as new freshman. Mike takes Spanish and Jason takes French. Mike's Spanish teacher believes in drilling the grammar, so Mike spends his year memorizing conjugations and vocabulary, and he reaches a high level of proficiency with this by year's end and aces his final exam. He gets an A. He's very uncomfortable speaking Spanish, though, since his teacher didn't spend much time on oral communication.

Jason's French teacher believes language exists for communication. She speaks only in French and from day one requires the students to talk as much as possible in the target language. She values attempts to use the language more than she values perfect grammar — believing that the grammar will come with more practice — so by the year's end, Jason speaks rather fluidly and comfortably in French, even if he makes mistakes often. He could not correctly recite the preterite of a particular verb the way his brother can, but he can ask for basic directions in Paris on a family trip over the summer. He also aces his exam and gets an A.

What's wrong with this picture? It isn't that one approach is right and the other wrong. The problem is that there are no clear standards within the school's language department, so the French and Spanish (and Chinese and Arabic, etc.) teachers have totally different criteria, assessment methods, and outcomes in their courses. It isn't fair that the brothers have such disparate learning experiences at the same

IN ADDITION TO CREATING A FAIRER LEARNING ENVIRONMENT, CONSIDER HOW A SCHOOL WHOSE TEACHERS WORK TOGETHER REGULARLY TO PLAN COURSES AND ASSESS STUDENT WORK HAS AN *advantage in quality control.*



school. This can be remedied by better collaboration and overarching course and department goals, while still allowing for each teacher to express his or her passion in class. The ultimate goal should be student learning and a shared commitment to best practices in achieving common aims.

In addition to creating a fairer learning environment, consider how a school whose teachers work together regularly to plan courses and assess student work has an advantage in quality control. These teachers are much more capable and likely to diagnose students' weaknesses or misunderstandings and work uniformly to target them course-wide (and, ultimately, department- and school-wide). In this way, the students of a passionate teacher who is not effective at helping students learn have a much greater chance of not slipping through the cracks, since other teachers are giving input on their assignments, assessments, and course pace.

A wonderful byproduct of a more standardized approach to assessments is that it also reduces the problems typically associated with grading. The perennial challenge of whether a teacher is grading fairly or not is alleviated instantly by shared grading sessions. If students know that, at any point, they can ask their teachers to have the other teachers evaluate their work to make sure the grade assigned is the most accurate, then you suddenly have a highly functional, transparent, collaborative culture in which parents no longer need to complain that a teacher's grading is unfair, because the entire design is in place to ensure that it is fair. When I worked in a school whose teachers group-graded this way, I felt an enormous amount of relief and support; not only had the tense negotiations about grades with students and parents evaporated, but I felt much more confident in my own assessing, since I was regularly checking to ensure that my colleagues and

I were aligned in our standards and criteria.

If we truly want to educate students well, we need to create a new kind of culture in independent schools, one that values collaboration, transparency, and equity. Letting teachers work in isolation is rarely, if ever, in the best interest of students. When we open our classroom doors, invite feedback, and engage in collaborative assessment and planning, we are expressing not just a passion for teaching, but also a deep commitment to our students' learning.

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