Blog Post: A Culture of Teacher Learning

By Shira Horowitz
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This guest post is by Shira Horowitz, a field instructor and longtime mentor in the DeLeT MAT program at Brandeis. She was for many years a kindergarten and first grade teacher at a Jewish day school. She leads the Teachers’ Summer Institute.

Imagine a room full of teachers in the middle of July. They are teachers who chose to spend a week of their summers learning, working and developing curriculum to take back to their classrooms. They are willing and eager to share ideas, resources, critical feedback and supportive suggestions. This was the atmosphere at the recent DeLeT Teachers’ Summer institute, held at Brandeis each July.

This year, 14 teachers from six different schools attended. They came together with two purposes in mind: to work on individual curriculum projects or research questions; and seek support, collaboration and feedback from colleagues.

The excitement in the room was palpable as teachers entered our sunny workspace, far away from the distractions of their usual settings. Some came alone, others with a team. Some planned to create a new unit, while others wanted to revise curriculum they had taught before. Some came in with crates full of resources they wanted to wade through, while others came in search of new materials and ideas. What everyone shared was a thoughtful, open, intentional approach to teaching.

Throughout the week, participants brought questions, dilemmas, or challenges to the group’s “collaborative conferences.” Using structured protocols and acting as “critical friends and colleagues,” others in the group were able to ask questions and provide thoughtful feedback to the presenters. People gently pushed each other to consider new perspectives and different possibilities, while encouraging each other to continue excellent work. One of the interesting outcomes of having teachers from wide-ranging grade levels (K-8) and many different content areas (math, social studies, Judaics), was discovering issues of pedagogy that cut across our different settings.

During the week of the institute, teachers reviewed principles of Understanding by Design, by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, and thought about big ideas and essential questions. They created and revised assessments that would answer the question, “How will I know if my students have learned what I wanted them to learn?” They created, they documented, they revised. But most importantly, they thought deeply about their work and shared those thoughts with others. At the end of the week, one participant wrote: “I discovered so much about who I am as a teacher and who I strive to be…I am sure that I am, today, a much more focused, informed, and more passionate teacher than I was Monday morning.”

As the facilitator of this group, I was amazed by this group of teachers. Their willingness to
come together as a new community and share challenges, ideas, connections, and questions made the week a productive one. Their openness to new ideas and dedication to learning and developing as teachers, whether they’d been teaching one year or twelve, was an inspiration to me. When I envision teachers immersed in a culture of learning, this is what it looks like.