
Taking a Closer Look at How We Communicate: Are We Utilizing the Experts in the Room?

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I was a high school math teacher for 15 years, and now for the past two years, I've transitioned to a district office position. I've gone to the "dark side." This last year, I have specifically been serving as the K-12 curriculum specialist, which means that I've had to work with groups of people that I have only interacted with in small ways. However, now I get to work with them and dig into some stuff with people that I haven't had to before. Two of the groups that I work with are principals across the district, and then also the special education department. As for the principals, I attend meetings for both elementary and secondary principals. The secondary principal meetings are a very comfortable environment for me. My adult life has been working in high schools, the principals speak my language, and I speak theirs. I don't have to think much when I need to communicate with them. We just understand each other most of the time. (Well, I'd like to think we understand each other most of the time.) It's not always easy, but we at least have a general idea of what the other person is attempting to say.

This year, I have started going to elementary principal meetings. These meetings have a completely different group of people than I've had to work with in the past. There are 40 principals in the room, most of them former elementary teachers. Little things like my slides are "not colorful enough" get in the way of my communication with them. My high school math teacher personality is different from anyone else in the room. So, I have had to consciously think about how I say things and what is being communicated back to me. It is more complicated when we are communicating with each other and working together than when I am working with the secondary principals. I have been learning how this group of professionals works and communicates this year. It has required help from some colleagues that speak the language, and they have helped me make the transition.

The other group that I have started to work with is the special education administrators. The math curriculum team and the special education team have been making a conscious effort to work together. I feel like our two departments have been ships passing in the night, and our teachers have been feeling the disconnect. I know as a classroom teacher, it was a point of conflict. If you want to get two groups of people in a room together and have an awkward meeting, bring together special education administrators and some math teachers that think we know everything. We just speak different languages and have a different outlook on most topics. It took us a couple of meetings of just talking around the same thing for 45 minutes before finally realizing we were saying the same things and agreeing, but just completely using different language. We were just not communicating very well.

On Sunday, when Jennifer was talking about how groups of people work differently, it hit home for me. As I was listening to her, I started thinking about this meeting (my second MTE-Partnership conference), thinking about the different groups of people that are here. We have mathematicians, mathematics teacher educators, and K-12 mathematics educators. Within each of those groups, people certainly don't work the same and don't speak the same way, but each of us works with a group of professionals that all have "grown up" in a culture that has shaped us to communicate within our community in a certain way. These "home cultures" that we come from create a challenge in a group like this as we cross bridges and work together, but I believe these are the different communities that have to work together to enact change.

I want to thank the leadership of the MTE-Partnership for consciously bringing this group of people together because, as Nicole said, it creates a very powerful network of people that can legitimately make some change and do some damage to the native culture that surrounds mathematics.

One of my wonderings is: Are we truly thinking about how we are working together and how we are communicating with each other when our different communities come together, or, are we keeping to ourselves? The math department is doing these things over here, and the math educators are doing those things over there. How are we bringing those different groups together? I think there are certainly some spaces where we are working together, but I'm just wondering are there more places and can we work together more as we are working to improve mathematics education?

Nicole Joseph brought up that education's goal is a cultural reproduction, which I think this is what education does right now. But I think that this group of people in this room has the power to start changing that culture around mathematics and breaking the cycle of what culture is being reproduced.

Another of my wonderings is: Are we bringing the expertise that is out here in this room to bear on the problems that we're trying to solve? We have different RACs. It seems like we are creating curriculum to solve problems or to be the change agent that we need. We know from history that curriculum alone doesn't solve our problems, and I was happy to hear about professional development discussed. How do we bring instructors and professors along with the big changes that are being proposed? I think professional learning is new for math departments at the university level. I'm wondering: Are we consciously bringing in curriculum experts to be a part of the curriculum development? Are we bringing in those people that have thought about teacher change and have worked on professional development? Are the experts in these different fields a part of the conversation as we are working on moving from the small group of people that are excited and wanting to make the changes in the way things are working and expanding the scale of this work? Are we bringing in those experts that have done some of that work in the K-12 world for a long time, and been through those struggles and then learned from those struggles, just to get that perspective and talk about what works and what doesn't work?

As we are working toward making lasting changes, we have to think about how we all work together. We need to bring in experts that have already done similar work to help guide our own work as we start to expand into other fields, and we need to recognize that we are no longer experts. As you invite experts in from a different community, take the time to think about the different ways we communicate with each other, just like I had to learn how to talk to elementary principals and special education administrators. We do things differently, but we all have the same goals, and we want to get to the same place. We need to make an effort to work together. Being aware of the way that we are communicating and forcing ourselves to communicate in a new way is challenging. I'm excited and energized by what is possible with this group of people and what is getting accomplished by the RACs. I feel like this is one of the first times that I am a part of a group where I think actual large-scale change is a possibility. I've heard about change that got started and fizzled out, I've seen pockets of people doing good things, but a systemwide network like this certainly has a lot of power and potential. I hope that we take advantage of that and think about who the experts are in the room and make use of those people.

On Sunday, our Nebraska team was talking about our local setting and thinking how we bring this back to Nebraska. It's one thing to have a big university and a large school district be a part of this partnership. However, as someone that is in a school district that doesn't just hire from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, we need all the local universities and colleges to be a part of this change effort. We need all the school districts in the area to be headed in the same direction so that when students leave those university methods courses, they are going to a school district that supports the work that they were inspired to do. It has to be a larger community discussion within our communities and within our local region as well. I want to put this out there as something to consider:

Do you have a common vision in your local setting? And if not, how do we get there and make that common vision across communities and partners?

As we think about reaching out to those in our region, we have to consider how we communicate with each other. We are all aware of the fact that it is very easy to come off condescending and preachy, so how do you bring others along on the journey? The team from Nebraska that is here, we are only a small portion of the mathematics community in Nebraska. How do we bring those in our local communities and our state as a whole into these conversations in a way that we are listening to each other and having true conversations?

As a public school administrator, I have the opportunity to deal with local politics. You won't be surprised to know that there are parents out there that have very strong views about what school mathematics is supposed to look like and what should be happening in their child's classroom. These concerns typically come from parents wanting what they think is best for their child. There are instances where the pushback I get is about preparing our students for college. The argument is that our students are going to go into a college math class, so they have to know how to operate in that setting. The question now is: What does a college math class look like now, and what are the expectations of the college mathematics instructor? We have to work together to explain to the public what changes are taking place, why the changes are needed, and that we all agree that these are needed changes to mathematics education.

I believe that for these cultural changes to happen systematically, we must work together to communicate to the public our expectations for what mathematics is and how this impacts what students learn in mathematics classrooms. If the whole mathematics community is not on the same page and working together, then this all falls flat. I hope that we all think about how we are communicating with each other and make use of all of the expertise in both this room and the larger mathematics education community as a whole, mathematicians, mathematics teacher educators, and K-12 mathematics educators.