Self-organized learning environments

Team-based practice

Team-based practices leverage multiple adults to create deeper and personalized learning opportunities for students.

Create space for students to explore complex questions with peers.

Strategy:	Frequency and duration:	Practice adapted from:	Elements of the Next Education Workforce:
Students self-organize into flexible groups to inquire into big questions without direct instruction	• 60–90 minutes, once per week	**Paulo Freire Freedom School**, Tucson, Ariz. • Core educator team: Five content area teachers, one special educator, one counselor • Learners: 65-78 students in Grades 6-8	• Dynamic teams • Learner-centered instruction, • Shared roster • Flexible space and scheduling

Paulo Freire Freedom School is committed to empowering students to be creative, collaborative problem-solvers who tackle real-world challenges in their community. To realize this vision, educator teams at Paulo Freire turn to self-organized learning environments: an instructional approach in which students explore complex questions in self-organized peer groups. Read on to explore an adaptation of Paulo Freire's process for facilitating self-organized learning environments.

1. Generate big questions

Generating high-quality questions that students can meaningfully engage with and inquire into is the most critical aspect of this team-based practice. Leverage your team to generate questions that will spark students' curiosities, interests and passions. The questions should be open-ended, expansive and generative. In other words, the deeper you think about the questions, the more possibilities emerge.

Tip: In determining how to phrase questions, consider using plural forms and conditional language (e.g., "may," "might") to help students consider multiple possibilities and more creative options. Instead of, "How can we…", try "What are some ways we might…" Instead of "Why does…" consider "What might be some reasons that..."

Example questions

1. In what ways might the scientific method help us solve problems that are important to us?
2. Using examples from history, what might effective leadership look like and how might it be different from ineffective leadership?
3. Using our previous readings, what might be some examples of injustices that are related to challenges in our school and lives today?
4. Using our knowledge of _____, what are some ways we might make a positive difference in _____?

The questions might serve various instructional purposes such as introducing a topic, deepening student understanding of a topic, supporting cross-curricular or cross-topic connections, consolidating learning at the conclusion of a unit or connecting previous learning to new situations and contexts.

2. Intentionally introduce questions and support formation of self-selected student groupings

Once your educator team has generated questions, introduce those questions to students and support them in forming self-selected small groups. Consider the following tips in making key decisions about this critical part of the practice:

Engagement with questions
Once your educator team has generated questions, consider how many and which questions small groups will choose from (e.g., groups choose a single question to answer, groups choose multiple questions).

Introducing questions
Consider how you will introduce the questions to students. For example, you might introduce all students to the questions as a single, large group; or you might introduce the questions to students in their individual learning spaces.

When you introduce the questions to students, consider providing a short, aligned resource (e.g., a video, musical composition, image, diagram, quotation, information sheet) that will elicit wonder and motivate students to dig deeper.

Managing self-selection of student groupings
Self-selection of small groups is an important aspect of this practice. As a team, discuss how you will approach supporting students in selecting small groups in a way that aligns with their interests and preferences and allows for flexibility. Additionally, discuss what parameters you will provide (e.g., groups must be 3-5 members) and how the team will support students in making productive choices about group members (e.g., inviting students to reflect on whether they will work well and remain on-task with the other individuals in their groups).

The learning space
Consider your learning space and how you will utilize it to best support each stage of the process. For example, you might introduce students to the questions as a large group in the school's library, then split into separate rooms heterogeneously by question once students have formed groups. Or you might introduce questions in individual learning spaces, have students use virtual tools to form cross-room groups by question, and then invite students to move to different areas homogeneously by question. Each team's staffing, space and resources differ, and the needs of each learning experience differ as well. However you proceed, be deliberate in how you use your space, as this will lead to smoother transitions and better results.

Educator deployment
Exercise intentionality in determining where educators will be and what they will be doing during each phase of the process. Highly experienced educators with strong classroom management skills might be better positioned to support rooms with larger numbers of students, while novice educators might be better positioned to work with smaller groups or to receive support from additional adults on the team (e.g., paraeducators). Educators who are especially skilled at prompting students to think deeply might take leadership roles in the early, exploratory stages of the project. At different points in the learning experience, educators' content area expertise might determine which groups they support. Make a detailed plan for educator deployment and ensure each educator is clear about when, where and how they will be supporting students at the varying stages of the learning experience.

Shared resources
Thoughtfully curate a mix of digital and non-digital resources that support student inquiry, and consider how you will distribute the resources across learning spaces. Although it may feel counterintuitive, it can be helpful to limit resources for inquiry such that there are insufficient resources for students to work alone (e.g., one computer shared by a small group). Faced with limited resources, students must collaborate and negotiate with each other in order to move their thinking forward.

3. Support students as they investigate and document their findings

Once you have introduced questions and supported students in forming small groups, invite students to investigate the questions on their own in the absence of direct instruction. Allow students to grapple with their thinking and resolve issues on their own whenever possible. Educators are encouraged to take on the role of facilitator, answering student questions with additional questions, expressing wonder and curiosity as to how students might overcome obstacles and encouraging them to employ the wisdom of their group to solve problems.

Prompt students to document their findings in whatever ways best support their thinking and process. For example, students might employ diagrams, pictures, thought bubbles, timelines, bulleted lists, window frames, graphic organizers, written products and more. The key is to encourage students to work toward consensus and to make mindful choices.

4. Invite students to present their findings

At the close of the learning experiences, students give voice to their thinking and perspectives, present findings, and share documentation from their investigation. In providing guidance on sharing, consider building on collaborative structures that you already utilize on your team and endeavor to maximize participation and engagement. There are a number of ways to do this: pairing small groups to share, jigsaw sharing, gallery walks and “speed dating” formats are just a few possibilities.

5. Facilitate a summary and debrief

Help students consolidate their learning by inquiring into what groups shared and modeling noticing patterns between groups. Prompt students to look for additional connections between groups, connections to their own lived experiences and future situations where this learning might benefit them.

Debrief the learning experience by checking in with students about how they felt during the process, how they felt about the quality of their thinking and how group dynamics enhanced or detracted from their learning. Ask what they would do differently in the future and how they might improve their process.

Why educators and students love this practice

Self-organized learning environments support the independent inquiry, interpersonal and self-direction skills needed to succeed in an environment that values creative problem-solving. Through repeated practice, students are able to collaborate more effectively, deepen learning and increase personalization by bringing their curiosities, interests and strengths to bear on complex questions.

Educators love this practice because they see students increasing their ownership of learning, collaborating more effectively and engaging with ideas in novel and meaningful ways. Students love it because it gives them autonomy, connects them to a deeper purpose and provides a sense of mastery.

Considerations for implementing this practice

Commit to the inquiry process
Your willingness to expand students’ thinking through questioning (rather than answering students’ questions) will be a key determinant in the success of this practice. If you would like to learn more about inquiry and the key behaviors that support the inquiry process, there are many resources available to support you on your journey.

Model curiosity and wonder
Model curiosity and wonder throughout each phase of the learning experience. In planning for educator deployment, consider how you might both lean on and learn from team members who are already especially effective in this arena.

Support students in navigating conflict
This process includes healthy group conflict. With that in mind, educators might consider referencing norms, expected behaviors and anchor charts that remind students how to proceed when faced with disagreements with peers. If the team has not done so already, consider explicitly teaching a process and skills for how students handle conflict within a group.

Inquiry resources to explore

- Professional learning experiences
- Books
- Blogs
- Free online resources