

How to Support Ongoing Learning: Mentor Forums

At the heart of a meaningful induction program is a group of excellent teachers who mentor novices, translating their own classroom experience in standards-based, systematic professional development. Just as beginning teachers need formal professional development, mentors of beginning teachers need job-embedded, collaborative professional development tailored to meet their needs.

Mentor Forums, which provide mentors with a venue to develop their skills and their understanding of adult learning, constitute a key component of professional development. Forums are led by experienced mentors with a deep understanding of new teachers' needs. These forums expand mentors' understanding of important mentor skills and concepts, such as building trust; observing, collecting, and sharing classroom data; conversations analyzing student work; differentiating instruction; lesson planning; and formative assessment. Forums provide a professional learning environment where mentors can reflect on their own practice with support from their colleagues.

Mentor Forums offer a venue to support mentor growth and ensure accountability. Artifacts of practice, such as NTC *Formative Assessment System* tools and the *Induction Survey*, provide mentors and their program leaders data with which to assess mentor and induction program strengths and challenges. Using these assessments, program leaders can continuously improve their support for novice teachers.

This practice brief offers ideas about how to support mentor development through Mentor Forums:

1. Develop a curriculum, scope, and sequence for mentor professional development. The Mentor Forum curriculum has three strands:

a. Formative Assessment System (FAS)—Each forum devotes time to learning more about the formative assessment tools mentors use to guide their work with beginning teachers. In the beginning of the year, mentors begin using the *Collaborative Assessment Logs*

to document the work. They use *Exploring School and Community Resources* to assist the novice teachers in becoming aware of the support available in their schools and the communities they serve. Mentors help beginning teachers set relevant professional goals tied to student achievement using the FAS *Setting Professional Goals* tools and protocols. The FAS focus for each forum changes as new tools and protocols are introduced and revisited.

b. Mentoring Skills and Strategies—Throughout this strand, mentors reflect on skills such as building partnerships with principals, collecting and sharing observation data with novice teachers, and building their own leadership capacity. Coaching partners meet to pose and solve problems and practice mentor conversations. Mentors use their own case studies to learn effective strategies for resolving challenging situations such as mentoring for equity.

c. Building Subject Matter Competence—Mentors must have a deep knowledge of the content area of their novice teachers. Thus, the third strand focuses on helping mentors build knowledge about content standards, *Individual Lesson Plans*, best practices to support English learners, and school technology.

2. Design a Mentor Forum. Just as a teacher must plan a lesson, so must a mentor leader design a Mentor Forum with clearly defined outcomes and structure. The purposes of a Mentor Forum are to:

- Provide support for learning the formative assessment tools and protocols
- Foster an inquiry-based professional learning community
- Offer collegial support for challenging mentoring situations
- Support professional learning
- Offer time for reflection, improving coaching skills, and building leadership capacity

Each forum has four sections. The times reflect the relative importance of each:

a. Connecting (30 minutes)—To build community, prepare for new learning, and link to prior experience. During this time, mentors agree on and revisit collaborative norms, connect with colleagues, share prior knowledge, and introduce topics for learning.

- b. **Learning** (45–60 minutes)—To develop, review, and apply skills; understand concepts; reflect on practice; and plan next steps. This is the heart of the forum. Learning may include professional reading, analyzing beginning teacher practices, resolving mentor challenges, refining coaching skills, and learning new teaching strategies for English learners and special populations.
- c. **Managing** (10–15 minutes)—To share business announcements. During this brief time, mentors receive updates and learn about other matters of mutual concern. Items are briefly described on the agenda; some can be read without discussion. Questions relevant to all can be answered during this time. Individual concerns are addressed after the forum.
- d. **Closing** (5 to 10 minutes)—To set next steps, synthesize learning, debrief, and evaluate the forum. Closure allows mentors to reflect on the learning, set possible next steps, and give feedback.

3. Develop facilitator skills. These skills include a focus on outcomes yet flexibility in reaching them. Facilitator skills include:

- a. **Plan and prepare.** Know current mentor needs and structure learning to address them. Make an agenda to be handed out at forums. Attend to the physical environment, and prepare appropriate materials. Communicate with mentors beforehand if necessary via email to be sure everyone is informed and prepared.
- b. **Clarify outcomes and rationale.** Adults like to know what they will be learning and why. Thus, facilitators must clearly articulate outcomes and rationale. This can be included in the agenda. Facilitators keep track of time and invite feedback throughout the forum to make in-the-moment adjustments. It is critical that facilitators read their audience to make sure that they are meeting everyone’s needs. Honest feedback is critical to prepare for the next forum.
- c. **Encourage full participation.** Create a safe environment for mentors to share both their successes and challenges, and lead discussions that encourage mentors to keep an open mind to different perspectives. Use a variety of communication protocols—pairs, small groups, or the whole group—to allow all voices to be heard.
- d. **Promote mutual understanding.** Be certain that everyone understands. Paraphrase, ask clarifying questions, and make connections between ideas. Give brief and specific examples. Summarize key points. Check for understanding.
- e. **Foster inclusive agreements.** Elicit a variety of perspectives and possible options. Encourage brainstorming, allow for dialogue, and move to making decisions that all mentors can support.
- f. **Organize teamwork and encourage leadership.** Build the capacity of mentors by providing opportunities for them to work in teams and to facilitate parts of the forum. Encourage leadership by asking mentors to create materials, facilitate, and take on other leadership responsibilities.
- g. **Attend to group norms.** It is critical to establish collaborative norms at the beginning of the forums and revisit them regularly. Posting the norms and verbally reinforcing them at the beginning of each forum keeps them alive. Self-assessment allows mentors to monitor their own behavior and adjust as necessary. Revise norms as needed.

Mentor Forum Design Template	
Time	Connecting: <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; min-height: 40px;"> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <p><i>Purpose:</i></p> </div>
	Learning: <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; min-height: 100px;"> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <p><i>Purpose:</i></p> </div>
	Managing: <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; min-height: 40px;"> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • • • </div>
	Closing: <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; min-height: 40px;"> <p><i>Purpose:</i></p> </div>

h. Stay flexible. Just as a teacher must have a plan yet be responsive to the changing needs of the students, a facilitator must remain open to adjusting and fine-tuning throughout the forum without being drawn away from outcomes and purpose.

4. Appoint a public recorder. Public recording captures the group's thinking, keeps information accessible, and provides group memory. Recorders support the group by capturing important ideas and supporting the facilitator. Tips for public recording:

- a. **Make sure to write in a large, legible size.**
- b. **Use colors.** Alternate dark colors for writing. Use red only to highlight, make boxes and arrows, etc.
- c. **Use watercolor pens.**
- d. **Use visuals to represent ideas.**
- e. **Face the chart while recording.**
- f. **Only the facilitator speaks to the group.** The recorder only asks the facilitator for clarification if needed, and corrections are made through the facilitator.
- g. **Remain in the background.** Don't distract.

5. Use a variety of protocols and strategies to respond to different learning needs. People learn differently. There are visual learners, those who learn best by talking with others, and those who need evidence or data. Mentor Forums can use a wide variety of protocols—such as *Structured Inquiry*, *Problem Pose/Problem Solve*, *Analysis of a Mentoring Success*, *Case Study*, and *Give One Get One*—to engage all types of learners. An invaluable resource for these protocols is *Professional Development for Mentors: A Facilitator's Guide for Induction Program Leaders*.

6. Establish coaching partnerships. Coaching partners build trust and allow mentors to share their challenges as well as successes, set professional goals, and practice mentor skills. It is useful to form coaching partnerships between new and veteran mentors. Clearly explain the rationale for coaching partnerships. Ask for input from mentors before creating partnerships. Ask for three mentors with whom each would like to partner. Structure time at the beginning of the year for participants to learn about one another, and allow regular times for them to meet during either the Connecting or Learning segment of the forums. Mentors can record their conversations and learning activities on *Mentor Collaborative Logs*.

Inquiry Questions

1. **In what way do you already provide professional development?** Use a Venn diagram to note similarities and differences. Which ideas for creating Mentor Forums might you try?
2. **What do your mentors need to know and be able to do?** Begin to structure a mentor curriculum, which includes a scope and sequence for the year.
3. **What are your strengths and areas for growth as a facilitator?** What resources do you need to build your facilitation skills? Where might you find them?
4. **Have you created agreed-upon collaborative norms?** What protocol did you use? Was it successful? How did you sustain the norms throughout the year when new members joined the group? What resources do you need to create and maintain collaborative norms?
5. **What protocols and strategies do you use for mentor learning?** Is there enough variety to meet the different styles of all learners? How do you regularly and consciously address all learning needs?
6. **How do you discover the needs of your mentors?** How do you regularly address these often-changing needs?
7. **Do your mentors have coaching partnerships?** How do they coach and communicate with one another? If needed, how can you strengthen these partnerships?

Resources

Baron, Wendy and White, Jan. *Professional Development for Mentors: A Facilitator's Guide for Induction Program Leaders*. New Teacher Center@UCSC. 2004.

Moir, Ellen, and Stobbe, Colleen. *Professional Growth for New Teachers: Support and Assessment through Collegial Relationships*. Teacher Education Quarterly. Caddo Press. San Francisco, CA. 1995.

Garmston, Robert and Wellman, Bruce. *The Adaptive School: A Sourcebook for Developing Collaborative Norms*. Christopher Gordon Publishers. Norwood, MA. 1999. NTC Padfolio.

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Case Study, Mentor Forum

I came to one Friday Forum with Joe on my mind. Joe was a new teacher who had told me that I didn't have to worry about him—he wasn't about to quit. A long-time baseball coach at the high school where I taught for seven years, he was finally fulfilling his long-time goal: teaching Social Studies. I thought it would be easy to work with Joe since we taught the same subject, but he was convinced that he didn't really need me.

Joe used movies to teach all subjects because he was convinced that today's students don't learn much from reading. I would come to class, and notice girls painting their nails and boys reading Surfer Magazine by the flickering video light. When I shared the data from my classroom observations, Joe brushed it off, saying the students could multi-task. Joe was quite popular with most of the students, and he didn't have to send kids to the office. The principal thought things were great. Joe didn't believe in formal lesson plans—he kept them in his head—and felt that his kids were learning the main concepts of history. I felt ineffectual, frustrated, and stuck.

That Friday, I had a chance to meet with Javier, my coaching partner, to problem-solve. Using the Coaching Collaborative Log, we focused on my support for Joe. Javier used the coaching language that we had learned—paraphrasing and asking clarifying questions to get a sense of what was working for Joe. We noted that his rapport with his students was a strength, as was

his commitment to teaching. Javier asked me questions to help me look at my challenge—having Joe look more closely at the content standards and his pedagogy. Together, we brainstormed possible next steps. I decided to go forward with the Analysis of Student Work protocol. Javier let me practice the conversation I would have with Joe to introduce this protocol. For next steps, I agreed to have the conversation. Javier promised to check in with me to see how it went and if I needed any other support. I left feeling better—I had a plan.

I introduced the Analysis of Student Work to Joe; for the first time, he was open. He decided on an assignment to look at, and we identified the content standards and criteria by which he would assess student success. Before we knew it, we were backing up to design a lesson that would teach what he actually wanted the students to learn. We wrote directions for the assignment. We set a time to meet after the students had completed the assignments. Joe thanked me for helping him with his lesson plan. The analysis gave him a good sense of where to go next, and he could see more clearly where his students might need differentiated support.

Analysis of Student Work became a regular part of Joe's and my work. He let go of his dependence on movies, and gradually planned every lesson. I know that my coaching session with my coaching partner at that forum was pivotal in moving Joe's and my practice forward.

—New Teacher Project Mentor, July 2009

About The New Teacher Center

The New Teacher Center is a national organization dedicated to improving student learning by accelerating the effectiveness of teachers and school leaders. NTC strengthens school communities through proven mentoring and professional development programs, online learning environments, policy advocacy, and research. Since 1998, NTC has served over 49,000 teachers and 5,000 mentors, touching millions of students across America.

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