

Improving Teaching with Collaborative **action** **research**

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What Is Collegial Inquiry?

Collaborative action research, also known as *collegial inquiry*, can be defined as a learner-centered approach to staff development. It grows from the tradition of action research, which emphasizes the idea that individual and teams of educators can and should study their practice as a means to improve it (Mills, 2007). Action research has a long history in the social sciences and was brought formally to education in 1943 by the Horace Mann-Lincoln Institute for School Experimentation as a process that could close the gap between research knowledge and instructional practices (Richardson, 2001). As a practical professional development approach, collegial inquiry, which is the term I'll be using throughout this book, requires educators in a professional learning community to make decisions about what to study and how to study and to commit to reflective practice.

The collegial inquiry process is different from other forms of collaborative work that educators engage in: Instead of being guided by products, educators using collegial inquiry are guided by questions. Often educators come together to design lessons or curriculum, create programs, or solve school problems. While their work is focused more on products, processes, or policies, participants in collegial inquiry focus on deepening their understanding of an issue, problem, or practice through systematic investigation.

THE INQUIRY PROCESS

Collegial inquiry is a disciplined, recursive approach to professional learning with a cycle of behaviors that involves establishing a focus; generating questions; taking action; collecting and analyzing data; reflecting; adjusting course; and, often, generating new questions to pursue.

This reflexive process supports learning and improved practice, and it comprises three stages:

Guiding Questions for Developing a Rationale

1. How will students benefit as a result of this study?
2. How will inquiry group members benefit? What knowledge will we gain? What skills or abilities can we develop? What dispositions will the study foster?
3. How might our school benefit? Which schoolwide goals or initiatives would the study support or enhance?
4. How might our district benefit? Which districtwide goals or initiatives would the study support or enhance?
5. What current professional literature and research do we know of that supports the study of this topic?



Evaluating Your Contribution to Discussion

Along with a group reflecting together on the quality of its discourse, it is also valuable for individual members to examine how they are contributing to a group's inquiry during discussion. With this tool, you can review the actions that can enhance discourse and privately consider your participation and set goals for improvement.

USING THE TOOL

1. Set aside 10–15 minutes of a group meeting to allow individuals to self-assess and set goals.
2. Individually, review the criteria and reflect on recent discussions you have participated in. Decide if this is an action that you rarely, inconsistently, or consistently practice during discussion.
3. Select one action that you believe you can improve on, and set a goal for a coming discussion or meeting. Make the goals as specific as possible.
4. (Optional) Share your goal with another colleague or the entire group. Ask your colleague or the group to help you reach it or give you feedback after the next discussion.