

GOING DEEPER—TEXT-BASED LEARNING



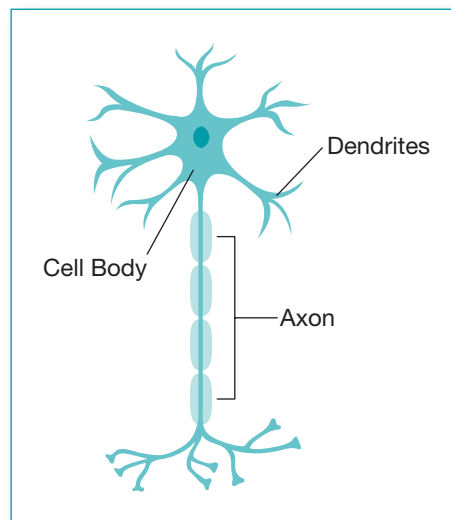
IDENTITY-DIVERSE TEAMING

Here is an opportunity to go a little deeper in understanding cognitive diversity. This can be done alone, or you might invite your team to read the text and then structure a dialogue to find shared meaning and application.

*Unlike other organs in the body, the brain is known to consist of highly heterogeneous types of cells—a **heterogeneity** that is at the root of cognitive functions such as learning, memory, emotional arousal and decision-making.*

—Weizhe Hong, assistant professor of neurobiology at UCLA (2017)

A picture of a brain neuron follows this paragraph. It is believed that a single neuron has between 1,000 and 10,000 connections to other neurons. The neuron by itself, however, does not make for an amazing brain. What makes that difference is how each neuron connects with all of the other neurons. Linker, Gage, and Bedrosian (2017) state there are approximately 100 billion neurons making over 10 trillion connections possible, and it is now understood that these connections are with unique and diverse cell types. It is through these unique and interdependent connections that human identity emerges and personality is expressed. The single neuron cell might be amazing, but it is nothing without all of the other diverse cells working and communicating together.



If our brains benefit from the diversity of interdependent connections, then imagine how much brainpower we can tap by working in more diverse groups that are psychologically safe. Susan is an exceptionally bright educator who teaches earth science in the middle school. When she collaborates with her science team, she doesn't hesitate to express her views. Sometimes she speaks with such verbal intensity that it causes other group members to withdraw from the conversation

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and passively go along with her suggestions. Hence, the cognitive engagement in this group is reduced because one person, Susan, consumes most of the conversational space. While she is a bright and thoughtful educator, she unconsciously limits her own cognitive capacity by not drawing on the knowledge and perceptions of other team members. Just as with brain cells, it is through the interdependent connections of team members where potential increases and collective learning emerges. While teams can certainly benefit from highly intelligent individuals, there is a liability when the focus is on individual talent vs. the collective whole.

The fact is, educators work in complex environments where causal reasoning by a few cannot solve many of the problems schools encounter today. That is because most educational challenges emerge from nonlinear patterns, rich with complexity. The past approach of a few leaders looking for root causes to solve complex problems will no longer address educational dilemmas in the 21st century. When it comes to closing the achievement gap, preparing students for jobs that have yet to be defined or reimagining education in a highly technological society will require multiple voices with diverse backgrounds in discovering relevant solutions.

School leaders today will have to find new patterns of collaboration where identity-diverse teams draw on their differences in perceptions, information, knowledge, and mental models in order to solve their most challenging problems (Page, 2018). Garmston and Wellman (2016) in their work with adaptive schools suggest “diverse ideas help groups to form rich responses to educational perplexities” (p. 100). Team members will have to continually ask themselves, Who are we and who do we need to be in order to address our challenges? This will require a more thoughtful inquiry around **identity-diverse teaming**.

Benefits of Identity-Diverse Teaming

As was already explored, diversity in teams can be inherent (age, gender, race) or acquired (life experiences, global travel, language skills). Scott E. Page (2007), a social scientist from the University of Michigan, observes that diversity trumps homogeneity in teamwork, especially when problems seem intractable or have complexity. Intractable problems are situations that require that we hold multiple mental maps in our heads at one time. Page’s research has found that diverse teams find more and better solutions because they bring different analogies and varied perspectives to the problem. Diverse minds create a problem space in which the team can look at different aspects of a problem simultaneously. Not surprisingly, Page (2007) found an added benefit of diversity. Diverse thinkers that worked as a team made better predictions than homogeneous groups. These predictions then served as guides as teams moved into action phases of their work. If we are going to solve some of our most pressing dilemmas in education today, teams will have to leverage their differences.

One of the authors provided a workshop on collaboration for a large urban system. District staff participating represented a variety of roles and responsibilities that spread from central office to individual schools. When arriving in the morning, it was obvious that those who knew each other were seated together and quickly striking up a conversation. In walking through the audience and greeting people, it was also apparent that table groups were from the same school or department, or had the same role. As the old saying goes, “birds of a feather flock together.” One might easily

interpret that this is a culture that does not consciously seek out differences and may tend to associate with whatever feels familiar. One of the first things the consultant did was start with a getting-acquainted activity where everyone had to stand up, move, and mix. As members returned to their seats, the energy shifted into a collectively intense focus. The consultant made a mental note to have them mix and mingle again later in the morning.

Responding in Identity-Diverse Ways

Different collaborative structures will require different group identities. Generally, educators tend to define their professional identity from the role they hold in the school, such as principal, counselor, or science teacher. In most schools, teams are typically organized based on role identification. This kind of group membership can easily evolve into silo mentality and like-minded thinking. Silo mentality is an attitude that is found in some organizations; it occurs when several departments or groups within an organization do not want to share information or knowledge with other individuals or groups in the same organization. Once comfortable in a group, it takes energy and effort to step into the differences of others. It is so much easier to stay with the group/people we know rather than perturb ourselves with diversity of thought. Margaret Wheatley (1999), a thought leader, author, and management consultant, says, “Nothing living changes until it interprets things differently. Change occurs when we let go of our certainty—our beliefs and assumptions—and willingly create a new understanding of what’s going on” (p. 1).

The authors have often drawn from the work of Margaret Wheatley to inform their thinking around teamwork in relationship to systems. On one occasion, Jim attended a presentation where Wheatley invited participants to gather in small, diverse groups to share thoughts on a prompt she offered during her keynote. Jim was surprised how each person offered a perspective that was unique and different from what others were stating. “At times,” Jim said, “it felt a bit awkward to have so many different views bumping up against each other.” In Margaret Wheatley’s book, *Turning To One Another*, she reminds us that ideas that surprise or disturb are often a mirror to our own veiled beliefs or blocked ways of seeing and understanding. She (2002) writes, “*If what you say surprises me, I must have been assuming something else was true. If what you say disturbs me, I must believe something contrary to you. My shock at your position exposes my own position. When I hear myself saying, “How could anyone believe something like that?” a light comes on for me to see my own beliefs. These moments are great gifts. If I can see my beliefs and assumptions, I can decide whether I still value them*” (p. 36). Wheatley models the type of metacognitive skills we all need to adopt to deal with differences.

Wheatley advocates creating conditions where group members are willing to disturb each other and challenge often invisible or hard to see internal beliefs and thinking. That means letting go of what is known and embracing cognitive dissonance so new insights can emerge for addressing challenging dilemmas. Cognitive dissonance is the mental discomfort we feel when we are faced with contradictory beliefs, ideas, or values. In schools that do not question their own thinking, it can be disconcerting to live with these disagreements. This won’t be easy because many school cultures are about getting to right answers quickly through nonconfrontational consensus.

The dilemma we all face when differences are expressed is staying open, curious, and interested. When diverse perspectives inform teamwork, we can choose to stay tightly bounded to

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our own views or we can avail ourselves of diverse perspectives to better understand self and others.

Does this now mean school leaders should no longer organize groups into like-kind configurations? No, there are times when working together in similar roles or responsibilities can be helpful. And rest assured, like groups also have diverse thoughts; they often are buried or unspoken. What may need to happen for like-kind groups to function in a more effective ways is to establish new habits where team members create room to disagree, ask hard questions, and express differences in perceptions without becoming personal.