Mapping the Development of Conditions for Collaborative Learning in School Communities of Practice

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About this Map

This map depicts the features inherent in communities of practice where practitioners continuously improve their teaching.

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Developing and leading collaborative communities of practice within schools, where learning genuinely occurs, can be difficult and uncertain work. This document offers a map to guide school teams in this challenging work as they forge, grow and sustain the conditions that can support continuous learning for instructional improvement. Why a map?

Maps show the features of particular areas and the relative location of these features to one another. We use maps to orient us to a particular place (e.g., a university campus, a museum or a city). Maps can come in handy when we are trying to learn about a new area, or when we become lost or disoriented and want to find out where we are, or when we want to know where to go and how to get there. Maps can be particularly useful when we want to chart a course or plan out a route in detail. Maps help us know which direction to set out in, as well as provide information about the various routes available to get from point A to B.

Of course, maps vary in terms of the types of features and details that they depict (e.g., trail maps that include elevation levels; road maps that include points of interest; city, state and country maps). Different types of maps (e.g., political, topographic, or population density) serve different purposes. What follows is a brief description of what this map depicts and the purposes for which it might be useful.

This Map's Features

The map on the following page depicts several features essential to communities of practice where practitioners continuously improve their teaching. The map identifies three features that are present in these communities: time for collaboration, purposeful collaboration and public practice. Each feature is described. For example, purposeful collaboration contains two aspects: 1) time is used to consider the reciprocal relationship between teaching and learning and 2) administrators and teachers share a vision for this use of time.

An array of actions is indicated for each feature along a developmental progression (forging, growing or sustaining). To the extent that any of these actions describe the current state of a specific community of practice, they can be thought of as indicators of how well a community of practice enacts that particular feature. It is also useful, however, to see these actions as mapping out

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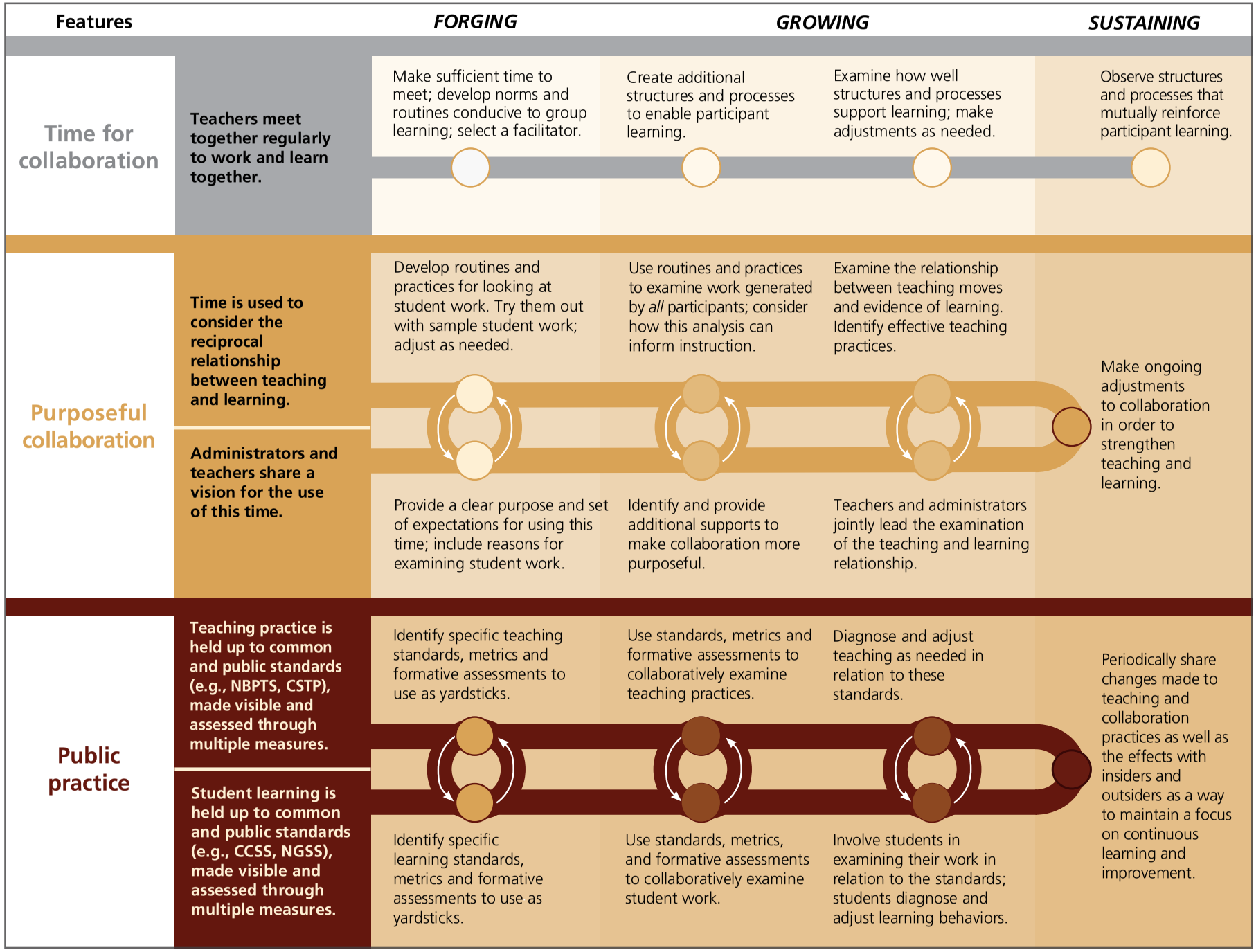

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a possible path for achieving each respective feature. In other words, these actions can be thought of as moves that describe how to improve upon particular features of communities where learning occurs.

Descriptions in each row show actions that typically advance the quality and nature of the interaction within that particular feature. Each row maps a typical progression of actions, but this is not a defined sequence of action steps. For instance, the action of developing norms and routines conducive to group learning is often a good place to begin when making time for collaboration, which is why it is situated in the forging column; examining how well structures and processes support group learning usually follows later. In a community that already exists and has been meeting regularly, however, such as a grade-level team, analyzing how well the group's existing structures and processes support the group's learning may be an instructive starting place to identify different norms and routines that will better support group learning. The actions indicated along the progression of each feature are inter-related, and often mutually reinforcing.

Users of this Map

Users are invited to notice the features that make up communities in which practitioners continuously improve their teaching and use the indicated actions as a guide to strengthen their communities. Users may want to try and locate their school's community of practice (i.e., grade level teams or subject area departments) on this map by considering the extent to which these three features are present in a specific community of practice. Noticing where a particular community is situated on the map according to the indicators for each feature may provide guidance on what steps a community might take to enrich its conditions for learning.

Identifying Communities of Practice

Schools are typically comprised of many communities of practice (e.g., grade level or subject area teams). These communities are bounded in some way. In addition, several features distinguish a community of practice from a group. These features are that its members are mutually engaged in a joint enterprise and have developed a shared repertoire for how they conduct their work.[1]

Consider the organized occasions when your school staff comes together: Who attends those gatherings? What is the purpose of those meetings? What typically occurs during those times? Most schools have multiple groups that gather at various times during or outside of the school day. Often, these groups meet with the broad goal of supporting student learning. Examples of such times are: school staff meetings, grade level team meetings, and department meetings. Sometimes membership in these groups is overlapping (e.g., a teacher may belong to grade-level and subject area teams). Some groups may have regularly scheduled meeting times; others may not. Some groups are called professional learning communities (PLCs) regardless of whether or not any *learning* actually occurs when the group convenes.

Situating a Community of Practice on the Map

To try situating a community of practice on the map, select a specific community that convenes with some regularity and whose purpose is to support or strengthen student learning. Consider: How is the collaboration time structured? How purposeful is the collaboration? Are teaching practices and evidence of student learning made public and held up to standards?

Using the Map to Chart a Course: Hilltop School

We use Hilltop School, an imaginary school, to provide examples of how this map might support the growth of three communities of practice: a group of teachers who meet monthly to participate in a "Lesson Study" process; a cohort of teachers who are pursuing National Board certification and are working together in a National Board certification support group; and a grade-level team of teachers. Each of these groups meets regularly with the broad goal of improving their instruction to better meet the strengths, interests and needs of their students. These communities of practice at Hilltop School are described below, and their location on the map is explained.

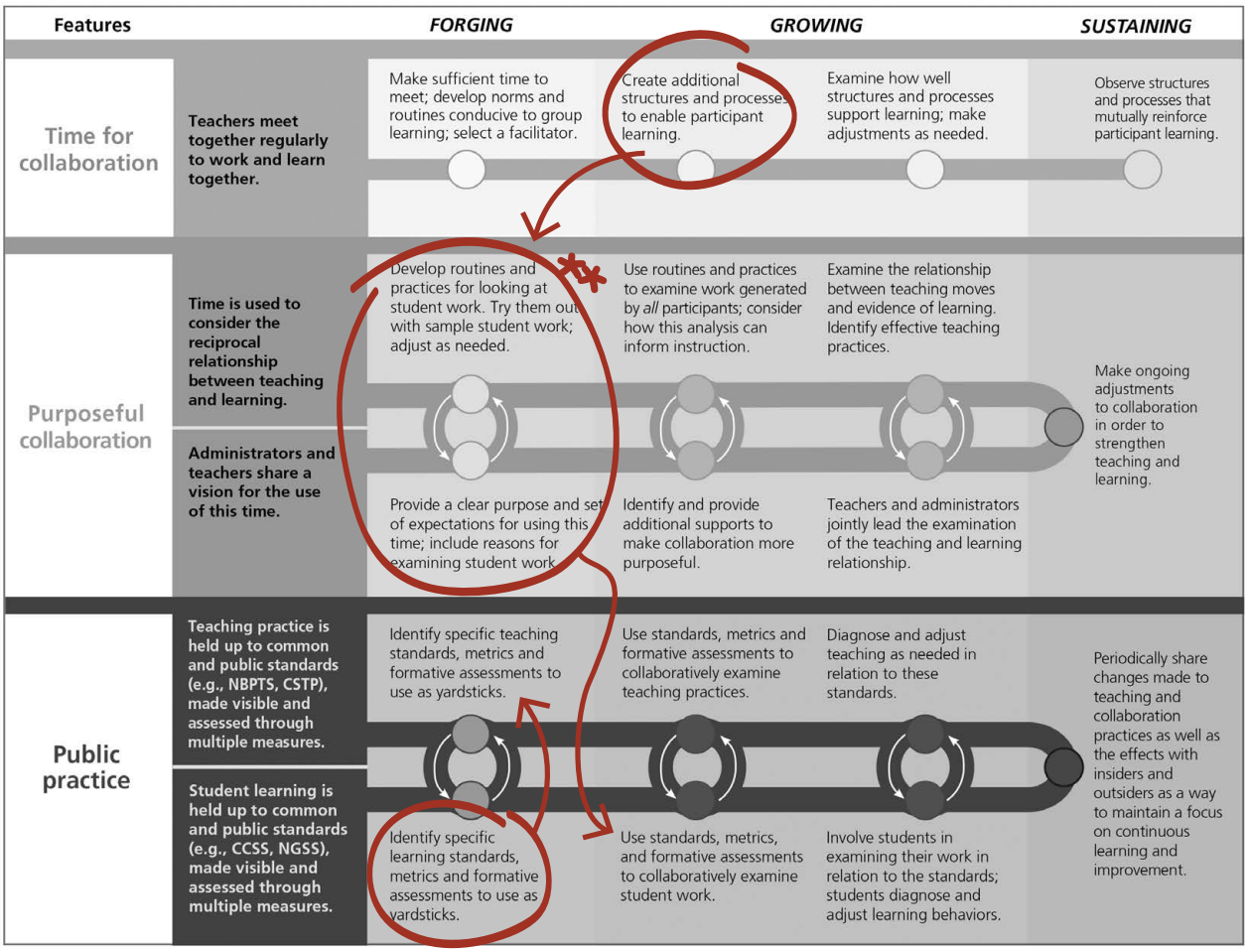
Community A: Teachers Involved in Lesson Study

(See Figure 1, page 5)

A group of teachers, who teach various grades at the Hilltop School, meet several times each month to plan a lesson together, to observe one member of the group teach that lesson in a classroom, and to discuss their observations of how well the lesson worked. This process is done in order to revise and polish the lesson before teaching an improved version of it to another group of students. This group of teachers typically meets every other week after school to discuss the lesson that they are co-developing. In addition, the principal arranges for substitute coverage for these teachers on the day they plan to observe the teaching of the "Lesson Study lesson." Beyond developing norms for their conversation, this group also developed norms for observing the teaching in each other's classrooms. For example, the teachers developed an observation protocol for capturing evidence of the interactions between teaching moves and student responses. The teachers also discovered that they needed to develop a routine for having conversations about the "taught lesson" to make sure all participants felt safe and were able to raise concerns in a manner that helped the group to improve its teaching. In these ways, this community made time for collaboration, and its members thought the additional structures and processes they had created to support their work were functioning well. The map reminded them, however, that they had not actually considered improvements or discussed "how well the structures and processes" supported their learning.

This group had worked hard to get the Lesson Study process organized in their school. The principal supported this work and often attended their meetings. Although all the teachers in this community were interested in designing strong lessons and working together to do so, interrogating the effectiveness of the lesson by examining samples of student work or student engagement in the lesson itself was not a familiar way of working for this group. This group was still developing routines and practices for looking at student work. This aspect of the community was still forging. Locating their community on the map gave members of the group the idea to bring some sample student work to the group that did not come from one of their own classrooms. They wanted to "practice" looking at and discussing work from someone else's classroom to give them the experience of having a genuine conversation about evidence of student learning and its relationship to teaching without worrying about hurting a colleague's feelings.

Figure 1. Community A: Teachers Involved in Lesson Study



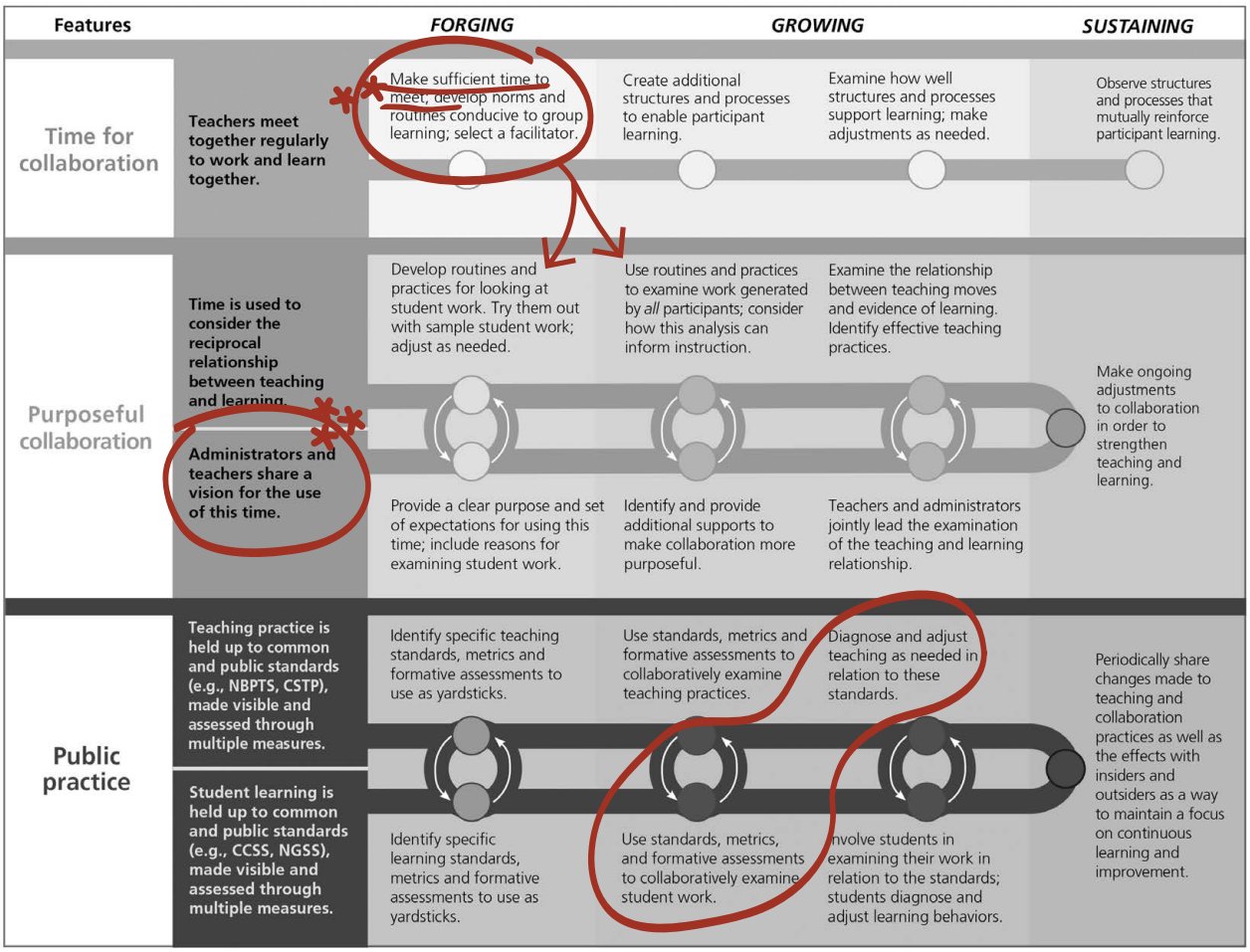
Members of the group thought practicing in this way could help them to have more authentic conversations about their own students' work. When this group located their community on the map, they starred this spot because strengthening their practices for looking at student work seemed critical for strengthen their teaching through the Lesson Study work. The map helped them to see a few other ways that they might strengthen this part of their practice. These were to use formative assessments from their lessons explicitly connected to student learning standards and to examine student work across classrooms. They also intended to look at teaching standards.

Community B: Teachers Involved in Nation Board Certification Support Group

(See Figure 2, page 6)

A different group of teachers at Hilltop School, some of whom also participate in the Lesson Study Group, are candidates for National Board (NB) certification. These teachers meet monthly to work on their portfolio entries but would like more frequent meetings to discuss their teaching. Guided by the National Board Professional Teaching Standards, the NB criteria for each

Figure 2. Community B: Teachers Involved in Nation Board Certification Support Group



portfolio entry, and the CCSS, these teachers had developed routines and practices for examining their teaching and the work of particular students. Indeed, the NB portfolio entries direct teachers to inspect their teaching practices and make adjustments. Consequently, teachers in the NB Support Group thought they had taken great strides in making their practice public and holding teaching and learning up to common and public standards of excellence. Where the group saw its greatest need was in developing a shared understanding with the principal about how they used their NB Support Group time. As they located their group on this map, they noticed that the principal, who was supportive in concept of their pursuing NB certification, really didn't know what the process entailed or how they spent their meeting time. These teachers wondered if the principal would help secure more time for their work, if she had a better understanding of what NB certification entailed. They put stars at two places on the map where they saw a connection—insufficient time and the need for a shared teacher/administrator vision for the use of this time. Once the group of teachers secured more time, they would be able to hone their routines for looking at student work in relationship to

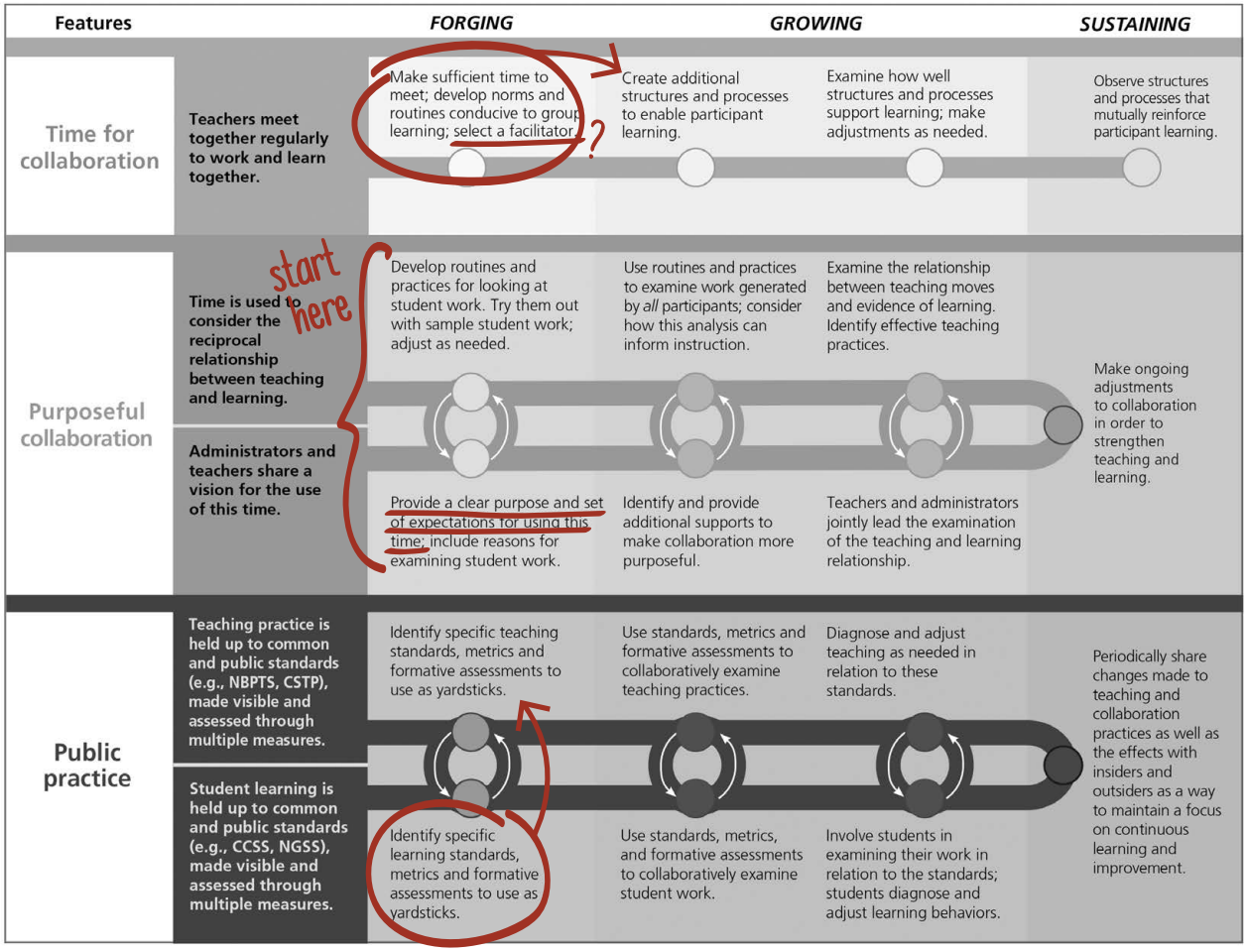
their instruction and they would have time to use these routines to look at other students in their classrooms in addition to the students who were the object of their study for the NB certification process.

Community C: Grade Level Team

(See Figure 3)

One Grade Level Team at the Hilltop School wanted to see if the map could help them figure out how to begin to use their weekly meeting time differently. This team traditionally used its time to plan and organize unit activities to make sure that the three classrooms were in synch with each other. However, with all the Lesson Study and National Board work going on in the school, this team wondered if they could use their grade level time together differently. As the map indicated, they had regular weekly meeting time. One team member was the "official" leader, which meant she organized their meeting agenda and was in charge of writing up the grade-level notes. They wondered, was having a designated team leader synonymous with having a facilitator? Like other Hilltop School teachers, this grade-level team was designing and teaching CCSS aligned lessons and using formative

Figure 3. Community C: Grade Level Team



assessments in their classrooms. However, this team realized they were not making sure that their grade level meeting time really involved purposeful collaboration. When they looked at this row on the map, they saw that they didn't really look together at student work. Indeed, the purpose of their grade level meeting time was not well defined. The map helped them to realize that they needed to discuss their purpose for the use of this meeting time, and they needed to decide what it would mean for them to agree to bring samples of student work as the focus of the grade level meetings. They noted that the map suggested involving an administrator in this conversation. They were not quite sure how to approach doing so, but they decided to invite the principal to their next team meeting where they could look at the map together and talk about some ideas for how to start using this time differently and more purposefully.

Conclusion

This map is intended to provide information and guidance to teachers and administrators who wish to strengthen the quality of collaboration in their schools. We hope that using this map to situate the current state of collaborative learning in your school will provide some guidance about the next steps your school communities can take to strengthen the learning adults are engaged in together. Revisiting this map from time to time with your colleagues may also help to make the evolution of collaborative learning in your context more apparent.

Endnotes

1. Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Acknowledgments

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