Tools for Collaboration: Convergent Consensus

By Greg Hopper-Moore

2/19/16

In the context of education, the word "collaboration" may conjure up images of small groups of students working together to solve a problem. Or we may think of multiple stakeholders discussing options for school improvement. But we may be less likely to think of teachers collaborating to assess student work, using a common scoring guide or rubric.

A joint scoring exercise can bring student standards into sharp focus. Teachers have the opportunity to perfect their understanding of a common scoring guide as they apply that rubric to dozens of student work samples. That shared understanding of a scoring rubric can lead to higher rates of reliability.

Here at EPIC, this type of collaboration is reflected in the work of our Advanced Placement Course Audit team. Each year, AP teachers submit thousands of syllabi for the AP Course Audit review. Review teams for each course use a scoring guide to analyze the syllabi.

What does that process look like exactly? We use a process of convergent consensus. Senior reviewers who are recognized as experts in their subject help to develop the scoring guides for each course. Once the scoring guide undergoes several rounds of review, it can be used to analyze actual syllabi for the course.

When the review team (as many as a dozen reviewers, including two or three senior reviewers) independently reviews the syllabi under question, they note their reasoning for their decisions. A syllabus can meet a requirement, demonstrate partial evidence in fulfillment of a requirement, or fail to show any evidence in a particular area. An example of a curricular requirement in history courses is that students must have the opportunity to write essays during the course. If a syllabus does not explicitly outline essay assignments, then the teacher who submitted it for review would have to resubmit it with additional information.

During lengthy teleconference calls, the review team members examine their responses to the syllabus review and discuss any areas where team members had differing responses. The goal of this convergent consensus process is to help all team members understand the curricular requirements and to apply them consistently when they are reviewing syllabi throughout the school year.

There are several advantages to this collaborative approach. Team members are each sharing their expertise and learning from other team members as they communicate openly about their ratings. The leadership model of the group, if not entirely flattened, is significantly leveled. Any member of the group can make a case for their opinion and sway the group's judgment.

The AP Course Audit relies on the knowledge and expertise of consultant teams on a daily basis. This is just one example of how EPIC uses convergent consensus to facilitate a variety of projects, proving again that collaboration isn't just for K–12 students.