INNOVATIONS FOR STANDARDS-BASED EDUCATION

FOCUS ON ASSIGNMENTS:
WORKING TOGETHER TO
IMPROVE TEACHING AND
LEARNING
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Background and Purpose

Nothing more accurately confirms what happens in the classroom than instructor assignments and the student work produced in response. Together they verify what students are being taught and what they have learned, remembered, and incorporated into their knowledge and skills. By reviewing instructor assignments and the resulting student products, it is possible to examine the topics under study and determine which standards are being taught and learned. Instructor assignments and the resulting student work are—literally—standards-in-action. Misaligned assignments can derail students’ ability to attain proficiency on standards.

Instructor assignments and the resulting student work are—literally—standards-in-action. Misaligned assignments can derail students’ ability to attain proficiency on standards.

Focus on Assignments is based on methods pioneered by The Education Trust. Focusing on assignments enables all staff to share a common understanding of the challenging work demanded by the standards and ask students to engage with the most important ideas and questions posed by various standards. It prompts instructors to immerse students in rich learning
contexts that promote active problem solving, exploration, and discovery through assignments—a central component of instructors’ work.

This method helps programs close the gap between what students are learning and the expectations embodied in the standards, by inviting instructors to:

- Connect their assignments and student work to standards in a relevant and engaging manner;
- Provide appropriately rigorous academic work for students;
- Develop common, high expectations for students that are well aligned with the demands of the standards;
- Improve their assignments and instructional practices so that all students can meet standards; and
- Engage in structured, thoughtful conversations with colleagues about standards-based instruction and shared professional learning.

Instead of beginning with standards and then developing matching assignments and classroom activities for instructors, this method proceeds in the opposite order. Focusing on what instructors are presently assigning to their students offers real benefits. If instructors never take a fresh look at what they are assigning, they are unlikely to see how much needs changing. When instructors design new materials in workshops, too often they become mere add-ons—and practice does not change. Working with what instructors are already doing makes staff development relevant and concrete. This method equips instructors with the skills to choose and tailor instructional materials and practice around rigorous, standards-based assignments.

Focus on Assignments encourages instructors to help students engage with the most important ideas, questions, and skills related to the standards, and it promotes

“The Critical Friends process enabled us to share ideas in a positive way and benefit from the input of our colleagues. I can’t count the times over the months we were together I found myself saying “That’s a great idea” or “I never thought of that” or “Wow, that’s a great way to do it, I can use that in my class...”

Deborah Abbott
SIA Instructor
Virginia
structured, thoughtful conversations about standards-based instruction and shared professional learning. Instructors have the opportunity to learn by doing the real work of teaching in cooperative Critical Friends\(^1\) workgroups, which offer the added bonus of sharing work with colleagues. As instructors improve standards-based assignments, they catalogue them for program use, making the method sustainable. When new staff arrive, programs have a ready source of relevant, challenging assignments, so that new teachers can hit the ground running and work on refining assignments, rather than wasting time reinventing similar ones.

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\(^1\) The Critical Friends learning community model is a professional development approach based on dialogue and reflection developed by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University in 1994. See a fuller description of the Critical Friends approach in Appendix E.
Overview

The method outlined below subjects everyday assignments presently used by instructors with their students to peer review and reflection, with the goal of strengthening their relevance and alignment with content standards.

Building on what instructors already do, this method builds expertise by doing the real work of teaching in cooperative workgroups. Adult education programs form Critical Friends groups of instructors who subject their recent classroom assignments and student work to their peers’ examination and solicit their suggestions for modification. They work through the following five-step method, which challenges them to inject more rigor and relevance into their assignments. The Critical Friends group:

I. Examines the purpose of the assignment: What are students expected to learn from it?

II. Analyzes the demands of the assignment: What skills and knowledge must students exhibit to complete this assignment successfully?

III. Compares standards of best fit to the assignment’s demands: How rigorously aligned is the assignment with one or more grade-level standards?

IV. Diagnoses student work to determine what it suggests about how the assignment might be re-envisioned: What does the student work reveal about the kind and level of skills, and knowledge students have learned and still need to learn?

V. Redesigns the assignment and plans new instructional strategies to match: How can the assignment be upgraded to add greater rigor and encourage higher achievement from students?
Materials: What You Need to Begin

Overview of Critical Friends Groups (one for each participant for the duration of the sessions).

☐ Feedback Checklist (one copy for each participant for at least the first few sessions).

☐ State standards (one copy for each participant for the duration of the team’s sessions).

☐ Presenting instructor’s assignment (one copy for each participant for each session).

☐ Corresponding student work (one set for the team to share for each session).

☐ Form for Focus on Assignments Notes and Observations (one for each participant for each session).

☐ Template for New and Improved Assignment (one copy for the facilitator or presenting instructor to fill out each time an assignment is presented).

☐ Survey: How Well Are We Doing? (one copy for each participant as needed to assess team progress).

☐ Large 3-ring binder to collect new and improved assignments.

“...It made me nervous at first because I needed to present my class assignment to all these excellent teachers, supervisors and even a director and explain what I was doing—it sounded easy, but I was just worried if I was doing something wrong or not enough teaching. However, when we started doing this, it’s not just judging people’s assignments, but we were analyzing the lesson as well as learning different ideas from each other. That really helped me understand different teaching styles and gave me an opportunity to adopt better lesson plans.”

Hyo Sung (Kim) Kwon
SIA Instructor
Texas

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**Timeframe to Complete the Process**

At the beginning of this process, instructors should meet every two weeks for about 1 hour. * Allow extra time at the first session to introduce the process, set ground rules, and put the first assignment through the analysis process. Sessions should be held regularly and scheduled in advance—every week or every two weeks is best. The more regularly you hold meetings, the more automatic and efficient the process becomes. After every instructor has presented an assignment, this process can be repeated indefinitely with other assignments to continue to hone instructors’ skills.

*For Virginia’s Standards-based Instruction initiative, you do not have to meet every two weeks, nor for only an hour. It has been recommended that you meet for a total of (at least) five times throughout the year and for two hours at each meeting.*
Directions for Implementation

Preparing for Focus on Assignments

I. Organize instructors into small teams (four to six members each) to examine assignments and the corresponding student work. Teams can be organized vertically across adult education learning levels or horizontally within or across content areas. Select the organizational structure that best suits your program’s needs.

II. Give each team member an opportunity to subject at least one of his or her assignments to the process. Focus each meeting on a different instructor and his or her selected assignment. While the process is most conducive to reviewing students’ written work, you also can use tapes of students’ oral work.

III. Be prepared to facilitate each meeting. The process works best and produces the most gains when facilitated—instead of expecting instructors themselves to facilitate their meetings.

IV. Before the initial meeting, decide whether or not to introduce the process and set ground rules for the team meetings without attempting to analyze an assignment. Keep in mind that the initial session takes more time if you choose to combine an introduction to the process with working through an actual assignment. Combining the two has the advantage of making the process concrete for instructors. On the other hand, separating the introduction from work on an instructor’s assignment gives members of the group time to internalize the process. If you decide to introduce the process in a separate session—and you
are facilitating several groups—it is fine to combine the groups for the introductory session.

V. Choose an instructor to go first who is open to receiving feedback and suggestions for improvement from peers—someone who can model the process.

VI. A few days before each team meeting, ask the presenting instructor to select a typical classroom assignment and corresponding student work. The instructor must provide a copy of the instructions for the assignment (in writing and just as they were given to students) to all team members for the meeting. The following is some advice regarding the assignments:

- Encourage instructors to provide a typical assignment recently given to their students, so that it is current and student work will be available.

- If teaching a particular concept has included several assignments, ask the instructor to present the culminating assignment based on the highest expression of that concept.

- Encourage instructors, who may want to offer their best assignments because they fear judgment by their peers, to bring an assignment they feel could use some attention and improvement.

- Remind instructors that the instructions for student assignments should be provided to the group just as they were given to students—orally or in writing—with no other details or context included.
● If the instructions for the student assignment were presented orally to the students, ask instructors to write down the instructions as given and note that they were given orally.

● Remind instructors not to include lesson plans, teaching or learning goals for the assignment, material being taught or reviewed, or information about what students did or learned, etc.

VII. Make copies of the instructions for student assignments (one for every member of the team).

VII. Make one copy of the student work for team members to share. Number the student work so instructors can easily take notes on and refer to each sample. Depending on your program’s policies, remove student names from the work samples to maintain student confidentiality and facilitate discussion.²

IX. As instructors move through the process, look beyond the specific assignments, generalize about what’s learned through the discussion, and consider ideas for additional professional development. Keep track of where instructors get lost or seem to need more help.

² Removing student names from the assignment samples can safeguard confidentiality as well as help instructors to focus on the work without being distracted by what they know or have heard about a particular student.
Introducing Focus on Assignments

**Introduce the purpose of Focus on Assignments.** Engage in a frank discussion with each team about the challenge and rewards of giving and receiving feedback on assignments. Set the expectation that, regardless of how good an assignment is, it can always be improved. Remind the team that the process focuses on strengthening the assignments, not on judging or evaluating the presenting instructor.

As part of the introduction, include a rationale for starting with actual assignments and moving from there to the standards. Underscore the need for the assignment to stand on its own without lesson plans or additional supporting information. Students can do no better—or learn no more—than the assignments they are given. That is why it is important to be able to tell from the assignment itself (and the resulting student work) what topics are under study and which standards are being taught and learned.

**Outline the five-step process.**

**STEP 1:** Introduce and determine the purpose of the assignment.

**STEP 2:** Analyze the demands of the assignment without consulting the standards. Decide whether to use Webb’s DOK or the CCRS Key Advances for this.

**STEP 3:** Compare standards of best fit to the assignment’s demands.

**STEP 4:** Diagnose student work.

**STEP 5:** Ratchet-up and redesign the assignment.
Review the feedback checklist with your team members. Spend some time reviewing and reflecting on the parameters of providing effective, respectful feedback to set standards for having fruitful discussions. A good place to start is by reviewing the Feedback Checklist. Make sure the team feels it adequately reflects their desired group norms, refining the checklist as necessary.

Develop a set of ground rules. Have a discussion about what it means to serve as a critical friend. Review the Overview of Critical Friends Groups. Then, as a group, generate a list of ground rules based on your discussions. Post the ground rules during the sessions.

Set out the full schedule of sessions. Setting out a full complement of sessions allows staff to plan ahead. The more regularly you hold meetings, the more automatic and efficient the process becomes.

Conducting the Focus on Assignments Process

Complete the Feedback Checklist. Ask each team member—including the presenting instructor—to fill out the Feedback Checklist before and after at least the first few meeting sessions to establish the ground rules firmly and to self-assess the quality of their feedback. As the team gains experience, you may want to use the checklist only intermittently when a refresher is needed.
The five-step process

1. **Introduce and determine the purpose of the assignment.**

2. **Analyze the demands of the assignment without consulting the standards.**

3. **Compare standards of best fit to the assignment’s demands.**

4. **Diagnose student work.**

5. **Ratchet-up and redesign the assignment.**

**STEP 1: Introduce and determine the purpose of the assignment.**

a. Ask the presenting instructor to take *one minute* to describe the assignment (not what was taught). If the instructor has to do more to explain the assignment to the team, chances are its purposes—or instructions—are not clear enough.

b. After briefly introducing the assignment, open the discussion to the other instructors in the group. Remind the presenting instructor to become a listener for the remainder of this step, to allow others to share their thoughts on the purpose of the assignment.

c. Remind team members to take the assignment at face value. They should not ascribe to it purposes that are not readily evident.
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STEP 2: Analyze the demands of the assignment without consulting the standards. (Applicable whether you choose Step 2A, Webb’s’ Depth of Knowledge or Step 2B, the CCRS Key Advances.)

a. Determine what a student needs to know and be able to do to complete this assignment. To do this, unpack the skills and concepts and determine where on Webb’s’ or another learning taxonomy the assignment falls, e.g., does it require students to explain, prove, or solve a problem?

b. Encourage instructors to resist the temptation to imbue the assignment with skills and concepts not readily apparent, even if all agree they were probably intended. If there are skills and knowledge that naturally could be part of the assignment, just capture the good ideas about how to make those explicit in the redesign of the assignment and move on to the next step.

STEP 3: Compare standards of best fit to the assignment’s demands.

a. Identify the standard(s)\(^3\) addressed by the assignment.

b. Choose no more than four standards and note whether they are at the appropriate level or a lower level of learning. If the assignment appears to be a better fit for a standard that is “below level,” note the gap in rigor between the “below level” standard and a corresponding standard at the appropriate level of instruction to complete this step. Avoid force-fitting an assignment to a standard. If the assignment clearly

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\(^3\) For purposes of Standards-in-Action, a “standard” is defined as the most specific level of outcome used by a state to indicate what students should know and be able to do. These can include indicators, objectives, and benchmarks. In Virginia, for the Adult ESOL Standards, these would be the “indicators.”
FOCUS ON ASSIGNMENTS: WORKING TOGETHER TO IMPROVE TEACHING AND LEARNING

The thing we’ve noticed most, and it’s not really a surprise, is the value the teachers derive from working together. This project has allowed them to have regular, substantive time together planning and learning. As you know, this is not typical for adult education teachers…. We’ve noted how, as the process progressed, a more integrated approach to the standards developed—looking at the connections between multiple standards or standards across levels became more comfortable for the teachers.”

Randy Stamper
SIA State Liaison
Virginia

does not fit any standard (at the appropriate level or not), go directly to STEP 5.

c. Unpack the relevant standards and note gaps between the skills and concepts demanded by the standards and those demanded by the assignment to determine how rigorously aligned the assignment is to the standards.

Note: The presenting instructor should participate with the rest of the team in the process from this point forward. He or she can respond to and pose questions, but make sure the presenting instructor does not monopolize the discussion.

STEP 4: Diagnose student work.

a. Ask instructors to work individually to diagnose the student work to determine: (1) how well students did on the assignment; (2) whether and how students seemed to have problems; and (3) what skills and knowledge students actually displayed in fulfilling the assignment.

b. Then ask the team collectively to compare and reconcile the individual reflections. Note what students know and do not know and how students struggled, if they did.

- If the assignment is not well aligned to the standards, then move to STEP 5 to redesign.
- If the assignment is already well aligned and students performed well on it, then find ways to move students to higher levels of achievement through new assignments.
- If the assignment is already well aligned, but students did not perform well on it, discuss strategies for helping students reach what the team
FOCUS ON ASSIGNMENTS:
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LEARNING

identifies as the proficient level of performance for the assignment.

STEP 5: Ratchet-up and redesign the assignment.

Looking back over the Notes and Observations from STEPS 1–4, decide what to keep, delete, or add to the assignment so that it more closely aligns to the standard(s). Work to make sure the changes add greater rigor and encourage higher achievement from students.

- Use the content of standards more than the specifics of the original assignment to guide the redesign.
- If only one standard matches the original assignment, consider adding others to enrich the assignment.
- Consider how to reconfigure the assignment to address student errors and misconceptions.

- The instructor may want to select another topic or context for the improved assignment to make it fresh and interesting to students. However, the same standard, perhaps with the addition of other level-appropriate standards, should be incorporated into the assignment, so that students can master the skills embodied in them.

- The presenting instructor also may choose to teach the revised assignment to a different set of students when that is the best instructional decision.

- The presenting instructor should leave the session with a more rigorous, aligned assignment and instructional strategies to improve student learning. If no improvements or suggestions resulted, challenge the team to reconsider. Other instructors in the group should briefly discuss any “lesson learned” from the redesign process that would apply in their own teaching.

“The five-step process has clarified in my mind the importance of maintaining a balance between the broader real-life skills identified by our standards and the more specific benchmarks that define it. At least for ESL activities, it became clear that the best activities identified a clear real-life communicative goal (Listening, Speaking, Reading, or Writing).”

Eduardo Honold
SIA State Liaison
Texas
Implementing the New and Improved Assignment

**Report back to the team.** Ask the presenting instructor to try the new and improved assignment and report to the team on its implementation—what went well and what could be even better. Ask the instructor to:

- Recap the assignment and how it was strengthened to align more fully with selected standards. (Note if there are ways to make the assignment even stronger.)
- Explain briefly any strategies used with students to prepare them for the assignment.
- Share examples of new student work and describe what they indicate about student learning and achievement.

Ask other instructors in the group to (very briefly) share something they have tried or changed in their own instruction based on the discussion at the last meeting.

**Ask the team to review the feedback process as the session concludes.** Ask team members, including the presenting instructor, to fill out the Feedback Checklist. In particular, give the presenting instructor the opportunity to express his or her feelings and thoughts to the group about the experience.

**Add the new and improved assignment to the resource binder.** Ask the presenting instructor to fill out the template for New and Improved Assignment, and then add that assignment, as aligned with specific standards, to a resource binder for use by instructors in your program.

> In this portion of the pilot I was able to reflect on my lesson and made some necessary changes to improve my lesson objectives. The meetings with other teachers helped me improve my lessons by going over the standards and giving me feedback which made them more level appropriate. This, at the same time, made the lesson more challenging to my students.”

* Liliana Black  
* SIA Instructor  
* Texas
Assessing the Group Process

Complete the Survey: How Well Are We Doing? After several work sessions, ask team members individually to fill out the survey: How Well Are We Doing? Use the results to reflect on and discuss ways to improve as a team. Discussions can be held right away, or you can collect the surveys, review them, and report the results to the team at the next meeting to begin a fuller discussion. Thereafter, repeat the survey intermittently to check on team improvements on the four characteristics of a well-functioning team: Application of the Protocol, Quality Feedback, Relevance and Rigor of Re-envisioned Assignments, and Professional Development Identified.
Reflections: Thinking Back and Looking Forward

After completing Focus on Assignments: Working Together to Improve Teaching and Learning, ask instructors to reflect on and then discuss what they have learned and to think ahead about what additional professional development and materials might be needed. Below are some reflection questions to pose to instructors:

- Reflect on the effectiveness of the activities. What worked well and what could be improved?

- How has participating in Focus on Assignments changed your thinking about state standards?

- How will you use these methods and materials to improve your teaching practice and students’ learning?

- Have you identified specific needs that could be addressed through additional professional development?

Implementing Focus on Assignments: Working Together to Improve Teaching and Learning provides an important snapshot of instruction and gives instructors time to focus thoughtfully on standards-based instruction in a supportive environment. It is one way to know the extent to which instructors are teaching to the standards and to learn what kind of assistance they need to improve.

While traditional classroom observations tend to focus only on what the teacher does—often through a simple checklist—the SIA observation process directs more attention to students and what they do in response to instruction. The ultimate goal of observing standards-in-action is to give administrators a structure for sharing their
findings on the prevalent teaching practices among staff. This, in turn, allows meaningful and practical support for instructors, as they work to teach standards to an appropriate level of depth and complexity.
References


Appendixes

A. Feedback Checklists for Team Members and Presenting Instructor

B. Form for Focus on Assignments Notes and Observations

C. Template for New and Improved Assignment

D. Step 2A: Webb’s’ Depth of Knowledge and Step 2B: the CCRS Key Advances

E. Survey: How Well Are We Doing?

F. Overview of Critical Friends Groups
Feedback Checklist for Team Members

☐ I will…
☐ I did…

☐ Think about how I would feel receiving the comments I give before offering them.

☐ Provide feedback on the strengths and accomplishments of the assignment, as well as its weaknesses.

☐ Regard the review as a time to be helpful to my colleague, not to display my own brilliance and expertise.

☐ Focus on the assignment, rather than on making judgments about my colleague as a person or a professional.

☐ Demonstrate support for my colleague when providing feedback by using nonjudgmental language and a supportive tone of voice and body language.

☐ Avoid overloading my colleague with feedback.

☐ Encourage my colleague to let me know when it is difficult to hear my feedback.

☐ Try to be as specific as possible, suggesting strategies, resources, etc., to improve the assignment.

☐ Leave my colleague feeling helped, motivated, and inspired.

Feedback Checklist for Presenting Instructor

☐ I will…
☐ I did…

☐ Stay open and receptive to the comments and reflections from my colleagues.

☐ Avoid becoming defensive.

☐ Demonstrate support for my colleagues when they are providing feedback by using nonjudgmental language and a supportive tone of voice and body language.

☐ Focus on improving the assignment, rather than viewing suggestions as criticism of my professional skills.

☐ Participate actively in re-envisioning a stronger and more aligned assignment.

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Form for Focus on Assignments\textsuperscript{5} Notes and Observations

Presenting Instructor: ___________________________ Date: ________________

Content Area: ___________________________ Level of Learning: ________

\underline{STEP 1: Examine the purpose of the assignment. (10-15 minutes)}

- What were students expected to learn from this assignment?
- Why might the instructor have given this assignment?

\underline{Notes & Observations:}

\textsuperscript{5} Adapted from \textit{Standards in Practice: An Instructional Gap Analysis} by The Education Trust.
**STEP 2 A: Analyze the demands of the assignment** (without consulting the standards) using Webb’s Depth of Knowledge. (20-25 minutes)

- What skills and knowledge do students need to complete this assignment successfully?
- Where on Webb’s’ Depth of Knowledge or another learning taxonomy does the assignment fall? (See the attached Depth of Knowledge wheel.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skills (verbs)</th>
<th>Concepts (nouns)</th>
<th>DOK Level(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Unpack the assignment and note the skills and concepts:
**STEP 2 B: Analyze the demands of the assignment** (without consulting the standards) using the CCRS Key Advances/Shifts. (20-25 minutes)

Is the assignment aligned tightly, partially, or weakly to the 3 Criteria with their Dimensions?

What key actions can be taken to more tightly align the assignment?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tight Alignment</th>
<th>Most (four or more) of the dimensions are rated as <strong>Meets</strong>, with the remainder rated as <strong>Partially Meets</strong>. There are only a few minor revisions (or none at all) needed to improve alignment to the standards.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Partial Alignment</td>
<td>Most (four or more) of the dimensions are rated as <strong>Partially Meets</strong>. Moderate revisions are needed to improve alignment of the resource to the standards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weak Alignment</td>
<td>Most (three or more) of the dimensions are rated at least as <strong>Does Not Meet</strong>. Substantial revisions are needed to improve alignment of the resource to standards.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Summary of key strengths and weaknesses:**

**Summary of key actions:**
STEP 3: Compare standards of best fit to the demands of the assignment. (20-25 minutes)

- Is the assignment aligned with one or more level-appropriate standards?
- How rigorously aligned is the assignment with one or more level-appropriate standards? Is it more closely aligned to lower-level standards?

Notes & Observations:

List applicable standards and their level:

Unpack the standards:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standard</th>
<th>Skills</th>
<th>Concepts</th>
<th>Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Note gaps between the demands of the standards and the assignment, including where both fall on Webb’s’ or another learning taxonomy.

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6 Understanding the Standards We Teach, Unit 1 of this guide.

7 The skills in standards are what students are expected to do to demonstrate mastery of the concepts, often represented by the verbs in a standard, and the concepts in standards are what students must know, generally represented by the nouns in a standard.
STEP 4: Diagnose student work. (15-20 minutes)

Work first *individually* and then *collectively* to answer the following questions:

- What does the student work tell us about the kind and level of skills and knowledge students have learned and still need to learn?
- Did the assignment give students the opportunity to exhibit what the standards demand?
- What are the most frequent and fundamental problems students appear to be having with the assignment? What do those patterns say about what’s needed in terms of additional instruction or re-envisioning the assignment?
- If student work shows that most students have done well on the assignment, with few errors, how might the assignment be re-envisioned to challenge students?

Individual Notes & Observations:

Collective Reflections:
STEP 5: Ratchet-up and redesign the assignment. (20-25 minutes)

Discuss how to strengthen the assignment, as well as the instructional materials and strategies needed to do so.

- How can we upgrade the assignment to add greater rigor and encourage higher achievement from students?
- What should be kept, deleted, and/or added to the assignment for tighter alignment with the standards?
- How could a re-envisioned assignment promote active problem solving, reasoning, and critical thinking?
- What instructional strategies are needed to address student errors and misconceptions?

Redesign the Assignment:
Template for New and Improved Assignment

What standards are addressed by this assignment?

1. 

2. 

3. 

4. 

Write the improved assignment below.

Instructional strategies to be used with this assignment:

“Lessons learned” from this redesigned assignment that can be used in different assignments or classroom/instructional settings:

Notes for next PLC meeting: Use this space to record what happened when you implemented the redesigned assignment or to record one or two examples of changes you have made in your own teaching based on the “lessons learned” from redesigning the assignment. **Be prepared to share briefly at the beginning of the next PLC meeting.**
Survey: How Well Are We Doing?

Fill out this survey individually to characterize how well your team is implementing—and succeeding with—the Focus on Assignments method. Be prepared to discuss your answers about how the team might improve its functioning.

Application of the Protocol
Team members come prepared to meetings and apply the protocol to the discussion surrounding an assignment.

Occasionally____ Sometimes____ Often____ Consistently____

Quality of Feedback
Team provides honest feedback on the target assignment, as well as detailed and meaningful plans for instructional improvement.

Occasionally____ Sometimes____ Often____ Consistently____

Relevance and Rigor of Re-envisioned Assignments
Re-envisioned assignments are closely aligned to the standards and their relevance and rigor are strengthened.

Occasionally____ Sometimes____ Often____ Consistently____

Professional Development Identified
Team consistently identifies specific PD needs and organizes to obtain assistance.

Occasionally____ Sometimes____ Often____ Consistently____
Overview of Critical Friends Groups

Introduction

The SIA Focus on Assignments process subjects everyday assignments currently in use to peer review and reflection, with the goal of strengthening their relevance and alignment with content standards. Using this method, instructors engage in planned, thoughtful conversations about standards-based education and professional learning. SIA group members begin by setting guidelines for having a collegial conversation and discussing what it means to be a Critical Friend. The following is additional information about being a Critical Friend in a professional learning community.

Definition of Critical Friends

Some practitioners have expressed concern that the “critical” in Critical Friends will lead to the disparagement of colleagues’ work. In this context, however, “critical” connotes “important,” “essential,” or “urgent.” In other words, instructors participating in this process are meant to provide crucial assistance to their colleagues. Through critique and analysis, they collectively develop strategies to improve student learning. Costa and Kallick describe a critical friend as “a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, offers critiques of a person’s work as a friend….takes the time to fully understand the context of the work presented and the outcomes that the person or group is working toward [and who] is an advocate for the success of that work” (1993, p. 50).

Background

Critical Friends groups are the product of a simple idea: providing deliberate time and structures to promote adult professional growth that is directly linked to student learning (Cromwell 2006).

The Critical Friends learning community model is a professional development approach based on dialogue and reflection. Developed in 1994 by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University, its principles are rooted in K–12 school reform, but they apply to all levels of education. This model examines both curriculum and outcomes reflected in student work to improve classroom instruction. Using a set of guiding and thought-provoking questions, group members provide tailored feedback to an individual instructor seeking assistance.

Purpose

Using structured discussions, this model is a collaborative approach to professional development for practitioners. Rather than attend one-day workshops focused on general classroom issues, instructors using the Critical Friends model engage in regularly scheduled group conversations to discover solutions directly targeted to their students’ needs. The collegial exchange of ideas is designed to expand participants’ knowledge. Through honest, open reflection on their own practices, instructors are encouraged to be innovative and to improve the quality of their teaching.
Critical Friends listen and ask incisive questions that encourage presenting instructors (those seeking guidance) to define and articulate the rationale and intended outcomes of their work. This refining technique has been called a “tuning process,” in which instructors adjust assignments to promote optimal learning gains for their students, much as musicians tune their instruments to achieve optimal sound quality.

**Process**

The Annenberg Institute used adult learning theory as the basis for the Critical Friends process, especially the principle that adults can engage successfully in autonomous, self-directed group learning. To promote such learning:

- The instructor seeking guidance poses a question or presents a challenge to the group and describes desired outcomes to guide the group’s work.
- The other instructors in the group raise questions and provide feedback, encouraging all members to gain new perspectives on their instructional practice.

**Principles**

- Examine teaching and student learning.
- Use data to inform the process.
- Share work so that colleagues can learn from one another.
- Commit time and energy to the group process.
- Be honest, reflective, and open to input from group members.
- Develop trust in, and respect and personal regard for, fellow group members.
- Recognize the competence and expertise that each group member brings to the process.
- Honor the norms established by the group.

**Structural Features for Success**

- Groups are small (4–6 members) to permit open discussion and foster participation by all members.
- Meetings are facilitated.
- Meetings are held regularly (at least once monthly, scheduled in advance) and for a substantial duration to maintain momentum and address pressing needs.
- Space is designated for the group meetings in a place convenient for instructors.

**Guiding Questions for All Group Members**

- What am I thinking now about my classroom and my teaching? What do I want to do to improve both?
- What am I learning about my teaching practice today?
- What strategies will I try in my classroom?