

March 1, 2025 • 10 min • Vol. 82 • No. 6

# Leading for Vicarious Learning



[Ann T. Mausbach](#) [Jenni Donohoo](#)



Promote collective growth by giving teachers opportunities to learn from one another.

Vicarious experiences, where teachers observe one another and learn from their successes, play a crucial role in building a shared understanding of effective learning and teaching practices. Fostering collective efficacy—the belief that teachers’ combined efforts can positively influence student outcomes—is paramount in creating a robust school culture.

The challenge for leaders is to build common understandings and nurture collective confidence across the various levels of teacher expertise. Consider the following scenarios in a school that is focusing on the effective use of learning intentions and success criteria:

- Teacher A starts each class by referring to the agenda listed on the whiteboard. Under “learning intention” the teacher has written, “Complete a graphic organizer on cause and effect.”
- Teacher B starts their lesson by stating, “Today’s learning intention is to understand how cause and effect influence the plot of a story.” In the discussion that follows, the teacher briefly reviews the plot, then launches into the lesson with no further mention of the learning intention or success criteria.
- Teacher C shares with her students: “Today’s learning intention is to identify how cause and effect influence the progression of events in a story. You’ll know you’ve been successful when you can explain how earlier events lead to later consequences using evidence from the text.” She explains why this skill is important and how it builds on the students’ previous knowledge. Throughout the lesson, she refers to the learning intention and success criteria, linking each activity to the goal. She uses exit tickets to assess whether students have understood the learning intention, and she adjusts her teaching accordingly. Finally, at the end of the class, she asks students to reflect on their progress toward the success criteria.

How do leaders help all three teachers learn, grow, and succeed? What distinguishes Teacher C from her colleagues is a *focus on student learning* that values clarity, purposeful instruction, and continuous assessment of student understanding. Teachers will benefit from professional learning experiences that help them develop and apply shared theories of learning that continually focus on student outcomes.

A shared theory of learning is a common understanding among teachers about how students learn best—about how to teach, the role of feedback, and how to adjust practices to fit specific students’ needs. This shared theory creates a more consistent and effective learning experience for students because the focus is on them.

Schools with high collective efficacy have structures that enable teacher collaboration for instructional improvement (Goddard, Skrla, & Salloum, 2017). One such structure is the use of vicarious experiences to provide a foundation for developing shared theories of learning as teachers collectively reflect on and articulate their understanding of effective practices. When educators visualize themselves in the shoes of others who have had success, they become convinced that they, too, have what it takes to succeed (Donohoo & Forbes, 2025).

Vicarious experiences are crucial for growth. In his quest to become a world-class javelin thrower, Julius Yego, who grew up in a rural Kenyan village, couldn’t rely on state-of-the-art facilities and equipment. He didn’t even have a coach. Instead, he harnessed the power of vicarious experiences by watching YouTube videos. He scrutinized the throwers’ skills in view of incorporating their techniques in his own practice. Then he went on to win both a world javelin championship and an Olympic medal.

Vicarious experiences are more than just mere observations. They’re observations with *intention*. Yego watched YouTube videos to understand the power, flexibility, and speed needed to hurl the javelin as far as possible so he could do the same. He had a clear purpose. In schools, the purpose of having teachers learn from vicarious experience is to increase collective teacher efficacy and improve student outcomes.

### **Three Essentials**

Effective vicarious experiences incorporate three crucial elements.

#### ***Similar and Relevant Models***

Teachers are more likely to try new strategies when they see them working in classrooms similar to their own. It’s that “If that teacher can do it, so can I” moment. Leaders can set up

opportunities for teachers to watch and learn from their successful peers. Observations could entail both individual as well as small groups of teachers observing specific practices in a classroom. For example, teachers may observe effective questioning techniques so they could learn from their peers. Other times, it might involve having teachers watch a video of questioning techniques, reading about what worked well for others, or listening to a podcast. Another option is providing virtual experiences—for example, viewing live-streamed lessons from another school to explore what questioning techniques are working for someone somewhere else.

Whatever the method, the observed teacher’s classroom should be similar to the observer’s context in any of the following ways:

- Demographic similarity: the students are of similar age, cultural background, or socioeconomic status.
- Content similarity: the teacher teaches the same subject area or uses a similar curriculum.
- Context similarity: the teacher works in a similar school environment, be it urban, suburban, or rural.
- Resource similarity: the teacher has access to similar resources or support systems.
- Challenge similarity: the teacher faces comparable challenges or obstacles in their teaching practice.
- Experience similarity: the teacher has a similar number of years in the profession and is of a similar age.

**If teachers are working in the same school, similarities are easier to identify.**

**Identifying similarities prior to partnering with a school is essential.**

### ***Guided Reflection***

Guided reflection helps teachers internalize what they’ve noticed and reflect on how to apply it in their own classrooms. As teachers observe others’ experiences, they think more critically about the learning process. This helps them not only identify and analyze underlying principles of effective teaching and learning, but also question their own assumptions about how learning

occurs. Guided reflection often involves structured questioning and collaborative discussion that help teachers move beyond surface-level observations to deeper insights. This can be accomplished either individually or in small groups. Figure 1 outlines the types of questions useful for this type of reflection.

### ***Follow-Up and Feedback***

Follow-up and feedback are essential to ensure that the insights gained from vicarious experiences translate into sustained improvements in teaching practice. Leaders can use feedback sessions to show their support and help teachers determine what further adjustments need to be made. This phase transforms a one-time learning event into an ongoing process of growth and refinement.

When providing feedback, effective leaders focus on helping teachers see the direct link between their instructional choices and student outcomes. For example, with Teacher A feedback would include both how to use success criteria *and* help the teacher understand the benefits of having students engage with it in meaningful ways. This type of feedback not only highlights the positive practice, but also prompts the teacher to analyze the cause-and-effect relationship between their teaching strategy and student learning. By consistently framing feedback in terms of these connections, leaders reinforce the idea that intentional teaching practices directly influence learning outcomes, thereby building teachers' sense of efficacy and encouraging ongoing instructional improvement (Donohoo & Forbes, 2025).

### **Creating the Conditions**

Vicarious experiences pull the curtain back on what's working. Here are some ways leaders can orchestrate efficacy-enhancing vicarious experiences.

#### ***Find Teachers' Strength, and Give Everyone the Opportunity to Be a Coach***

Research has found that it's more motivating to give than to receive. Receiving is passive and can make a person dependent on others for guidance (Grant, 2013). Giving, however, is active; as we encourage others, we find our own motivation. This results in what Grant (2023) calls *the coaching effect*, that is, increased confidence in our ability to surmount struggles after guiding others through them. Coaching reinforces the idea that you have something to offer. Although teaching others can build competence, *coaching* others builds confidence.

This approach may seem counterintuitive, especially if the teacher’s practices aren’t solid, as in the case of Teacher A. Nevertheless, it’s crucial to afford each teacher the opportunity, at some point in the year, to showcase what they’re good at. Using previous observations and self-assessments identify teachers’ strengths, and invite them to coach others in these areas.

Having teachers observe only one or two “star” teachers creates dependency and can actually hinder efficacy beliefs, whereas having *every* teacher observed by peers communicates a powerful message about the belief in their potential. Even teachers who have not fully integrated a new practice can be observed with an eye on their new learning. For example, watching the teacher use success criteria as an exit ticket for the first time could provide meaningful reflection for everyone. Opening every classroom door sets high expectations for all.

Leaders also need to give thoughtful consideration to teacher pairings. Although everyone needs the opportunity to coach and to be observed, each teacher doesn’t need to be observed by every other teacher. Central to nurturing competence and confidence across a diverse range of expertise requires leaders to understand the skill levels of teachers and provide opportunities that are most likely to result in improvement. Observing Teacher C might be too big of a jump for Teacher A, but Teacher B could provide just the right amount of challenge.

### ***Use Heavy Doses of Reflective Questions***

Posing reflective questions is crucial to the process of developing shared theories of learning because the learner takes an active stance. When individuals can answer their own questions it reflects their own personal thoughts, beliefs, and preferences, which is much more likely to lead them to action (Berger, 2020, pg. 36).

Questions that get teachers to think about *how* students learn are central to reflecting on vicarious experiences. Leaders can use the question prompts in Figure 1 to get teachers to ask themselves more reflective questions about what they witness when observing in a classroom.

Figure 1. Student Outcome Prompts

Less Focused on Student Outcomes	More Focused on Student Outcome
What was the level of student engagement?	How did the observed practice impact student learning?
What did you notice about student responses?	What evidence of student learning was the most powerful to you and why?
What instructional moves stood out to you?	When you observed the teacher doing (insert description of practice) how did the students respond?
What did you see the teacher and students doing during the opening (or closing) of the lesson?	Why do you think the teacher did (insert description of practice) at that particular point in the lesson?
What did you notice about student interactions?	What effect did student collaboration have on their learning?

### ***Be Relentless about Clarity***

A coherent instructional program benefits both teachers and students. Students achieve at higher rates in schools with coherence (Fullan & Quinn, 2016), and teachers develop stronger collaborative teams when they have a common approach to teaching and learning (Bryk et al., 2010). Coherence happens when there is clarity of purpose, precision in practice, transparency, progress monitoring, and continuous correction.

Vicarious experiences help promote coherence—but only when the focus is on creating a culture rich in inquiry, dialogue, and action around commonly defined practices. *Before* observations can occur, staff must develop shared meaning and a common focus on the practices they are going to observe—for example, on how a teacher might use questioning techniques. Using collaboratively developed “look fors” can help. Look fors are clear statements that describe an observable teaching or learning behavior, strategy, outcome, product, or procedure (Mooney & Mausbach, 2008). They bridge the gap between learning and implementation because they help teachers shape shared theories of learning.

Developing clear look fors gets teachers to wrestle with what’s important and why. Consider the difference between a look for that asks teachers to “differentiate instruction,” as opposed to this more specific one: “Teachers will ask questions, cues, and prompts during group work to inform next steps in instruction.” When teachers are armed with such statements about

what the practice looks like and sounds like in the classroom, peer observations become a powerful vehicle for deepening both teacher and student learning.

### **Shared Learning, Improved Practice**

Vicarious experiences play a pivotal role in developing a vibrant instructional culture. By creating opportunities for teachers to observe, reflect, and collaborate with peers facing similar challenges, leaders foster the development of well-formed, shared theories of learning. The true power of these experiences lies not just in observation, but in the guided reflection and feedback that transform insights into actionable steps. The outcome is a school environment where both teachers and students achieve high levels of learning, fulfilling the promise of collective teacher efficacy.

### **References**

- Berger, J. (2020). *The catalyst: How to change anyone's mind*. Simon & Schuster.
- Bryk A. S., Sebring P. B., Allensworth, E., Luppescu, S., & Easton, J. Q. (2010). *Organizing schools for improvement*. University of Chicago Press.
- Donohoo, J., & Forbes, G. (2025). *Collective impact: Overcoming the twelve enemies of teacher efficacy*. Solution Tree.
- Fullan, M., & Quinn, J. (2016). *Coherence: The right drivers in action for schools, districts, and systems*. Corwin.
- Goddard, R., Skrla, L., & Salloum, S. (2017). The role of collective efficacy in closing student achievement gaps: A mixed methods study of leadership for excellence and equity. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, 22(4), 1–17.
- Grant, A., (2013). *Give and take: Why helping others drives our success*. Viking.
- Grant, A. (2023). *Hidden potential: The science of achieving greater things*. Viking.
- Mooney, N., & Mausbach, A. (2008). *Align the design: Blueprint processes for school improvement*. ASCD.

**Ann Mausbach** is an associate professor of educational leadership at Creighton University, Omaha, Nebraska, and coauthor of four books on leadership and school improvement.

**Jenni Donohoo** leads professional learning in organizations and school districts and has authored or coauthored five books on collective efficacy and collaborative inquiry.