

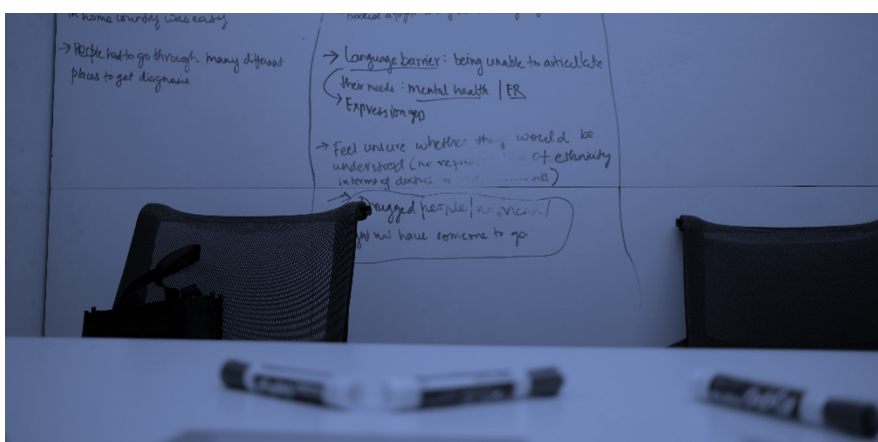
March 2020



# How to Build Learning Communities

## Connecting K-12 and Post-Secondary Educators

### Themes and Insights: Design-Thinking Summary



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## Introduction

The Innovation Hub and the I-Think Initiative share a goal: to inspire and educate students using an integrative approach that helps them tackle real-world problems. To this end, I-Think—which works primarily with K–12 students, teachers, and school leaders—trained the Innovation Hub’s teams to conduct design research from 2016–2019. In this project, we propose a different way for our organizations to work together: fusing our experience at the K–12 and post-secondary levels to prototype an “experience” that connects and supports educators at all levels and institutions.

This report documents the second part of our collaborative project. In part one, we reviewed the literature on educational communities and professional development, and analyzed case studies of existing enrichment opportunities for educators.<sup>1</sup> During the second phase, we interviewed educators across the GTA. We found several unaddressed needs and barriers to growth, alongside success stories of classroom innovation.

The educators we spoke to are passionate about fostering cohesive systems of learning. They imagine a world in which students, educators, and administrators strive together to use the best educational practices. But educators think their initiative often goes unmatched by school leaders, professional-development experiences, and even some peers. Overall, it is clear that educators want professional and social support as they experiment with the best ways to move education forward. When they are embedded in strong communities, they can innovate, seek understanding, and grow.

We explain these key insights and offer recommendations for designing an educator experience that fosters collaboration, honesty, and passion. Our design principles and recommendations emphasize working together around a set of shared values and treating the educational process as an ecosystem. We hope these insights will inform the design of future experiences that build educational communities and develop educators’ professional skills.

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<sup>1</sup> Please contact the Innovation Hub for the previous report.

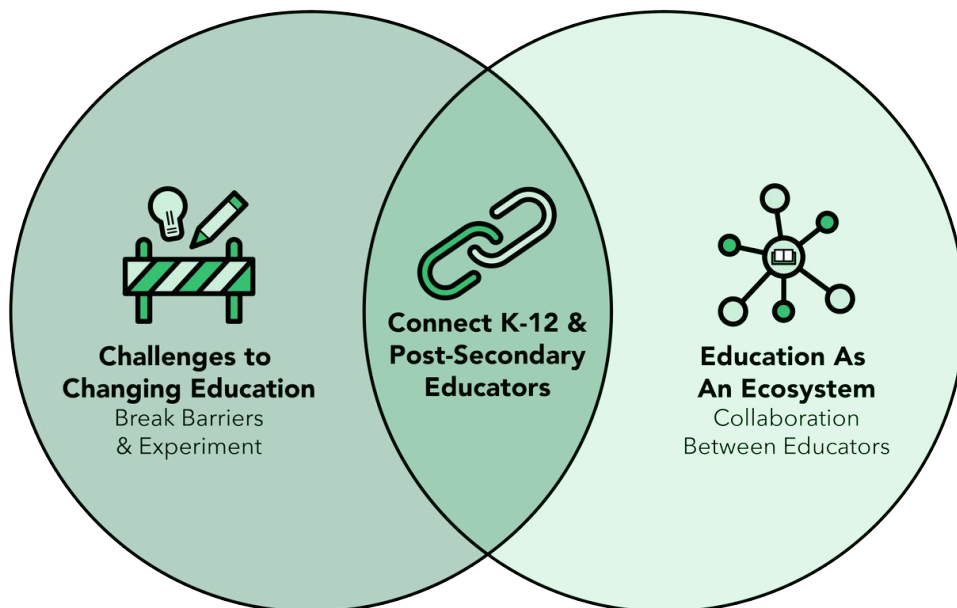
## Methods

For this project, we partnered with the I-Think Initiative to explore educator experiences from primary to post-secondary. We interviewed a dozen educators from all levels across the Greater Toronto Area and gathered journal entries from two more educators. As with all Innovation Hub projects, we focused on understanding participants' stories first. By fully exploring the human experience before designing, we get deeper insights.

We built our understanding by analyzing the interviews and journals, in which we found two overarching themes: **Challenges to Changing Education** and **Education as an Ecosystem**. We used these to draft design principles and recommendations that address educators' unmet needs.

## Themes and Insights

Through these methods insights were further organized under two key themes: **Challenges to Changing Education** and **Education as an Ecosystem**. These themes structure the following sections of the report, in which we present the results of our analysis of interviews and additional data.



*Figure 1. Visualization of two themes*

## Theme One: Challenges to Changing Education



**From K–12 to post-secondary, educators face barriers to experimenting with their pedagogies.** These are especially strong for K–12 educators, who have less control over their own syllabi, course material, and evaluation criteria. Though many educators do enjoy support from peers and school-board leaders, their frustrations raise important questions. How can educators feel included in decisions about the material they teach and how they teach it? And how can they feel supported when they try innovative ways of connecting with students and measuring progress?

*“Within the system that I work in right now, when you ask questions that run against the status quo, you can feel like you're negative, you can feel like you're cynical, you can feel like you're a naysayer. Because it's not what's normally heard. So I even think, when I reflect on the things I'm sharing [during this interview], I could come across as [having] a negative outlook on the profession or on classrooms.*

*But for me, [I'm frustrated because there's] an unfulfilled possibility. [... When] you get a glimpse into something [that works], [...] then you know what's possible. [In a good classroom,] I've seen my kids come alive, I've seen what's possible for them. And then it's gone. [...] And you want that back. And then, [when] somebody's like, ‘Nope, it's not coming back,’ that just doesn't sit well.”*

—K–12 Educator

Educators want to redefine the educational experience, and they crave opportunities and support to do so. They seek to adapt conventional curricula to new ideas, which will help students prepare for a new world. Curriculum updates will also enrich the depth and quality of learning for both students and educators.

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### Fixing the Broken Telephone

**K-12 educators feel that the impetus for change is missing.** Often, their frustrations stem from communication barriers with administrators. Educational administration is complex: information fails to filter through, and perceived priorities misalign. Administrators have diverse competing priorities that are not necessarily top-of-mind for educators, leaving the latter feeling neglected and unheard.

While educators understand this complexity, they want greater transparency. The more they see of the decision-making process, the better they understand the concerns of leaders and the stronger their faith that the system is really changing.

*“I sat at two tables just this week, where administrators had asked me to come in and help them [...]. For both of those meetings, each of those administrators excused themselves more*

*than once. At any given time, it was rare for all of them or both of them to be at the table. And their ability to be invested in the learning was kind of hijacked by the other things going on in school. So their roles are not designed to put the classroom at the forefront. Their roles are designed to [focus on] which kid's freaking out, who just killed a squirrel in the backyard—like those are the priorities in the school and there's the design flaws in how [making decisions about] learning happens.”*

—K–12 Educator

Without transparent communication, educators do not know if their pushes for change are being considered. They also need to hear what broader educational goals are being set by the school board or province, and how the expectations for classroom teachers are evolving. When clear communication does happen, they appreciate educational leaders’ initiative and dedication.

*“We've had a lady [on] our board for the last four years and [...] her big question is: ‘What matters in your classroom? What's gonna count in your class? And what's important to [students] to do?’ [...] Once you've identified those [things], it's not enough to ask somebody to do it. If you can't model that for them, and very explicitly break down the things that are happening in that type of learning, then you not only don't understand it yourself, you also don't know what it looks like to do it. You won't notice it when you see it.”*

—K–12 Educator

Educators want strong commitment from administrators who lead by example—who not only suggest changes from a top-down perspective, but also model how educators should adopt new practices in the classroom. When educators and leaders have a continuous dialogue, both hear the other’s frustrations and the reasoning behind their requests.

## Learning Beyond the Book

**Educators are acutely aware that society is changing. They believe they should adapt by changing their teaching style, but their experimentation is not always well received.**

Teachers continue to emphasize that students should meet curriculum requirements. But now that facts and formulas can be found within seconds, they want to move past rote memorization and towards developing critical thinking. Since these skills are difficult to evaluate through multiple-choice tests and perhaps even written tests, this shift requires a concurrent change in evaluations.

*“Not all students are successful [in] writing tests. And when they have a test to show what they know, to show their understanding and their thinking skills and their application skills and communication skills, a test or worksheet, that product isn't going to allow all students to be successful. There [are] some students who will be very successful in that environment. But there [are] others who won't be. So it really is, for me personally and for us and our board, it's really about differentiating how we are offering assessment opportunities to students so that*

*we truly are being able to capture what that student understands and what they are capable of.”*

—K–12 Educator

Instead of teaching students that they should strive for 90 percent on every assignment, educators want to teach them how to recover from failure, how to discover novel answers to mundane problems, how to look past the face value and assess the underlying factors, and so on. They want to teach a skills-based—rather than a facts-based—curriculum, because they find meaning in being useful. After all, if a student can easily Google facts, what more can an educator offer to students?

*“I tell my students that my job is to teach them to think; it's not to fill their heads with content. We live in a day and age where that content is accessible anywhere. [...] So when we don't know something now, we can literally look it up, and we can look it up quickly. So it really is, for me, about students learning to think and to think critically and to problem-solve. And when they have a problem, whether it's a problem in life or a problem that I give them in math class, [...] I've taught them to be resourceful. So they have a different way to solve that problem. If their go-to strategy isn't working, they're not going to panic, they're going to go, ‘Oh, it's not working,’ and they're going to find another way. So for me as a teacher [...] it's really about immersing students in opportunities to develop those skills.”*

—K–12 Educator

Metrics and outcomes are important, but they should align with student experience and learning. The modern classroom is evolving away from analyzing volumes of facts and figures, and towards coaching students to integrate knowledge into constructive, critical viewpoints and novel solutions.

## A Classroom for Everyone

**Educators believe that students need more than a one-size-fits-all approach. In helping all students succeed, educators need to balance equality and equity.**

An equality-based approach asks educators to treat all students the same way, regardless of individual needs and personal experiences. This approach is meant to provide fairness, but many educators realize that an equity-based approach leads to more success for students with different needs. Not all students will respond the same way to the same treatment. Educators attempt to simultaneously promote respect for all students while ensuring that students who are more vulnerable receive appropriate accommodations.

*“I feel the most important skill and the number one skill that we miss out in school is to teach kids that literally they're capable of anything and anything is possible. Kids are taught from a very, very young age that there are certain things that they're incapable of. So you will notice kids become adults and say, ‘Oh [...] I wasn't an artistic person, I was more of a words person.”*

*I wasn't a numbers person, I was more of a visual person.' Like these labels are given to kids at a very young age [...], so we're not teaching them that they're capable of anything."*

*—K-12 Educator, Advocate*

When many educators were students themselves, they faced discouragement from teachers who used a one-size-fits-all approach. They now want to give future generations a better experience and help them achieve more success. In vowing not to repeat the mistakes of their own teachers, they position themselves as lifelong learners, inspiring fellow learners with understanding and compassion.

*"I think that learning is an exchange [...] that happens in [a] relationship. I'm a relational educator [...], so I don't see myself as being a sage on the stage, and the students as empty vessels that I'm pouring my deep and profound knowledge into. But instead, I engage students by inviting them into an opportunity to learn together. Because that is how I think the best learning happens: in acknowledging that I don't know everything, but that together, we can learn, if you're open to learning."*

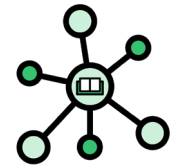
*—College Administrator*

It's important that learning be facilitated as an exchange that respects students with dignity and recognizes each person's unique circumstances and considerations. Educators balance equity and equality in their teaching by building relationships with their students and taking the time to empathize and see students for who they are. Both are important values which build foundations that support a diversity of learners within the classroom.

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As the needs of the world evolve, education must also evolve, and educators want to lead that change. They want to look beyond evaluations and metrics and to respond to the diversity among their students. They feel that their eagerness is often unmatched or overlooked by others, because the "broken telephone" disrupts communication.

## Theme Two: Education as an Ecosystem



**No teacher is an island. Educators need to connect with both similar-minded and diverse groups of peers to find inspiration and solutions to day-to-day teaching struggles.** Peers act as sounding boards and mentors for each other. Even educators who are confident researching and innovating on their own admit to benefitting from peer-to-peer connections.

*"It isn't that I get along with [the members of my learning community] because we think the same; I get along with them because we're interested in the same thing: getting it better, never totally getting it right, getting it better. And the people that I think are the closest parts of my community are the people who've let their ego go. It's not personal for me. [...] You know, you work with some people who want to be the face behind something or the name behind an initiative. I don't really care about any of that."*

—K–12 Educator

Educators are already forming learning communities in their day-to-day interactions. They bond over shared values, including equity, honesty, adaptability, and accountability. Rather than waiting for top-down policy changes, they are leading by example in exploring new educational approaches.

*"I've been to a lot of education conferences, and [...] there [are] a lot of the same beliefs and thought patterns there; there's not that much new stuff going on. So I think it's important to bring other disciplines into your support network. If you're an educator, it's great to network with other educators to see what they're doing, but it's really nice to have a refreshing perspective. Like in STEM, we usually see the same types of speakers, like the women in tech and the CEOs of the tech companies come and talk. [...] You know, we're always talking about diversity, right, like in STEM or in education. But diversity doesn't just mean like race or gender; it means people that come from different perspectives entirely."*

—K–12 Educator, Advocate

The following insights address the barriers that educators face when they seek out community. Many factors—a lack of meaningful conferences, difficulties connecting with peers, missing perspective on how their work fits into a bigger picture—disconnect educators at all levels from an ideal teaching community. These disconnects prevent them from translating their values into practice.

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### For the Benefit of the People

**Educators across K–12 and post-secondary have reservations about attending professional-development conferences.** They question *who* benefits from these events. Some feel that networking events are meant to raise revenue for the organizers and increase exposure for keynote speakers and sponsoring companies. In other words, the intention and execution of

such events are misaligned. Even after attending an event with world-class guest speakers and panellists, an educator may not learn anything ground-breaking if the atmosphere did not work for them.

*“I come from a background of community developments, where we ran all sorts of things on a shoestring in little spaces, and those were wonderful community-building experiences, when you are not eating croissants and bottled water from hotels, [...] dressed in dresses and dress pants. I think sometimes even the atmospheres within these big conferences actually detract away from the connections that could be made.”*

—College Administrator

Despite this, conferences can provide valuable learning, not because of the amenities but because of the people. Educators speaking about their professional-development journeys said that the most inspiring and impassioned connections they made were with peers who shared their values. These peers may come from entirely different backgrounds—in terms of grade level, subject matter, and teaching style—but they fundamentally believe in similar causes. For example, teachers may bond over how to prepare future-ready students.

*“I got great feedback and questions, and I ended up talking with a professor who teaches drawing to science students. So they would use diagramming as a way to think about their observations in the lab or in the field. So it was great, because we ended up having these really interesting kind[s] of conversations around collaborations in ways we didn't think. I would never have known about that if I hadn't gone to that conference. It was very interesting. [...] It's kind of standard, you know, like go present a paper, you know, go participate in a workshop and like the sort of standard conferences. [The organizers] didn't purposely set out to be interdisciplinary; [...] I just happened to run into people who were interested in more interdisciplinary kind[s] of work.”*

—University Professor

Additionally, as budgets and funding to attend large-scale conferences diminish, educators are using networks other than conferences to gather knowledge. They connect with peers through online forums and workshops. They also chat and exchange informal texts with colleagues. These small-scale networks help them solve everyday problems.

*“There's a network of teachers around the school who [I] will just go to [and] ask for help [...]; there's probably ten to fifteen other people at the school who anytime I could knock on their door and ask them about troubleshooting a problem.”*

—K-12 Educator

For a conference or event to benefit educators, its activities and discussions must be centred around issues that impact the audience. Events should be specific enough to unite participants, while still being broad enough to apply to a variety of experiences. Educators should see themselves and their values reflected in professional-development and community-building activities.

## Experimenting as a Community

**Learning is a community effort. It requires constant feedback and adjustment from both educators and students.** To change education effectively, all stakeholders should be invited to the conversation and heard. This means teachers and administrators should talk to each other, as addressed in Theme 1, but also that educators should see themselves as journeying with other educators and students. In this space, educators and students are encouraged to learn from and with one another.

*“Almost every week we engage in community circles. So we actually come together as a community, share our learning experiences, right from day one, setting the tone of mutual respect and appreciation for and of one another. And then promoting a growth mindset, [...] the concept that we don’t look at making mistakes or failure as a bad thing, but actually as where we experience our successes.”*

—K–12 Educator

*“One of my sayings in class is that ‘We have to feel comfortable in feeling uncomfortable.’ [...] I am also very honest with students that teaching is a lifelong journey in being a ‘professional student’ for life.”*

—University Educator

In a democratic community, no one individual or group makes all the decisions. Every individual should be heard and taken seriously so they can see themselves helping to shape the future. This includes listening to the perspectives of students, who best understand the impacts of education on their own lives, and sharing educators’ own learning ethic with students. Thus, classrooms become a place not for students to strive towards perfection, but for every member of the learning community to co-construct knowledge.

## Bridging Between Each Step

**Educators from K–12 are separated from those in post-secondary. Both groups lack effective channels of communication with the other.** Many educators question this disconnect: if the purpose of K–12 education is to prepare students for their next stage, and if many students’ next stage is higher education, why do K–12 educators *not* know what will be most important for their students when they take this step?

*“[Educators are] often basing the choices that we make on what our experience was in school, because that’s all we know. So I would really love to hear [from postsecondary educators]: What are the skills that you don’t see students coming with? And what are the skills that we should be creating? What do you need them to be able to do when they come to you, and what is going to allow that student to be successful when they graduate from you?”*

*When we look at what their career paths are going to be, what are the skills that they need to have? And we know skills don’t get developed overnight, so what is it that we need to be doing way down here in elementary to really build that foundation so students can be moving*

*towards whatever it is they're going to need to be successful in university and when they move on to a career? [...] When they go to university, what are the skills that [those educators are] not seeing? I would love to have that conversation."*

*—K-12 Educator*

Collaboration across levels means more than exchanging syllabi and content. It's also important for educators to see *how* students are learning at different levels. How do students interact with one another to produce student culture? How does learning impact students psychologically and emotionally? Such insights can be shared by exchanging stories in an open and supportive environment.

*"Students may have been getting like 80s in their high school and be admitted and come [to university] and the first essay they get a D, and they have no idea what's hit them. Like, why? They always thought they were good students, and suddenly they're being really punished because they don't have the skills.*

*You realize that there's a huge range of the kinds of preparation that goes on in high schools. So I do think the answer to that does lie in the high school[s]. I mean, high school teachers see their students, you know, several times each week. [In their writing classes,] they should be getting feedback, tough feedback, and it should be a process over a period of years, you know, from Grade 9 to Grade 12, where they are really developing and building and consolidating those skills of research and writing.*

*[...] I think the high schools could be doing more. I don't understand why they're not so I don't want to judge them. I just don't know what their issues are, you know, what's the approach or the philosophy that they have in high school towards developing this kind of skill set?"*

*—University Professor*

In our interviews, many educators brought up the idea of auditing each other's classrooms. Each time, they quickly dismissed the thought, often with a laugh to say, "as if." While classroom audits might pose practical challenges, this pervasive sentiment shows that educators are interested in true collaborations, wherein they are immersed in a foreign environment, learn its details intimately, and reflect upon the experience with the host educator.

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Education—from the first day in kindergarten to the last step across a convocation stage and beyond—is an ecosystem. Right now, educators often feel like isolated islands, but they would like to be more connected: to their students, as co-learners; to their peers, to learn from and build on each other's work; and to educators at other levels, to understand the challenges facing their students at every step.

## Personas

Personas bring students' stories to life. While they describe fictional characters, they are based upon real experiences that students recounted in interviews.

### Stephen

- **Graduated from his Master of Education 2 years ago**
- Returned to the field of education
- Travelled and worked as a fitness instructor
- Currently teaching a Grade 8 Math class in public school



### Innovating Against the Cultural Tide:

I just attended a professional development workshop last weekend and I'm really excited to apply this new technique I learned with my class. Even though I've been teaching the same class for three years now, I'm always trying out new things. I knew I wanted to teach at this school since I was a student teacher here during my Master's because the administration encourages educators to experiment. I couldn't imagine what it would be like to teach at a school where most of the educators don't try to grow.

For example, a few weeks earlier, I was visiting my older sister's family. My two nephews were doing some homework when I got there. The older nephew—he's currently in Grade 5—was working on an English assignment. I peeked over his shoulder at the worksheet and couldn't help rolling my eyes. At the bottom of the worksheet was a copyright logo reading "© 1994." That thing's a relic at this point! But I know this isn't necessarily that teacher's fault. It's hard to seek out new teaching ideas and materials on your own, without support from your school leaders or school district.

Even with the support of my principal and peers, I find it difficult to innovate. It's report card season right now, which is the bane of my existence. Throughout the semester, I keep an individualized learning portfolio for each of my students. But I have to assign a number grade to all of them, regardless. I can already imagine the next parent-teacher conference, where all the parents will ask me why their children got this or that grade. During those meetings, I try to show parents the students' portfolios, to discuss the students' passions and abilities, and to inform parents of students' challenges. But at the back of my mind, I wonder if doing all this is worth it. A lot of these parents are thinking: "How will these grades affect my child's ability to get accepted into post-secondary?"

Sometimes it's difficult to stay confident in my experimental and innovative approach to teaching when I know that these students are going to experience something completely different once they graduate from me. Seeing how much my students appreciate the transparency and attention, though, my worries go away. Especially for those students who've been told that they're the wrong type of learner their whole life, my class is the first time they've felt confidence in themselves. I also receive encouragement from other teachers who are facing similar struggles. If I'm having a bad day, sometimes I'll walk down the hall to another teacher's classroom or send a text to a teacher I met at a conference. After having those conversations, I always feel better. We usually don't come up with a solution to change the whole system, but it's just nice to feel heard and understood.

## Michelle

- **Educator at a large Canadian university (since early 2000's)**
- Received PhD in Psychology in the 1990's from an American liberal arts institution
- Worked in consulting across many large and small technology firms before returning to academia



### Finding the Right Time and the Right People:

I've been teaching the Intro to Psychology course at our university for over a decade now but it's only in the past few years that I've felt comfortable in my approach to teaching. Of course, I'm also constantly thinking about how to create the best academic environment for my students. On one hand, it's important to have a good grasp of the fundamentals. On the other hand, many students are most concerned about finding a job after graduation. Every semester, I have students come into my office hours or ask me questions during lectures about material that I thought would be fairly basic. I'm surprised by how many students can't connect to the material, mainly because they can't apply the theories to their real-world experiences.

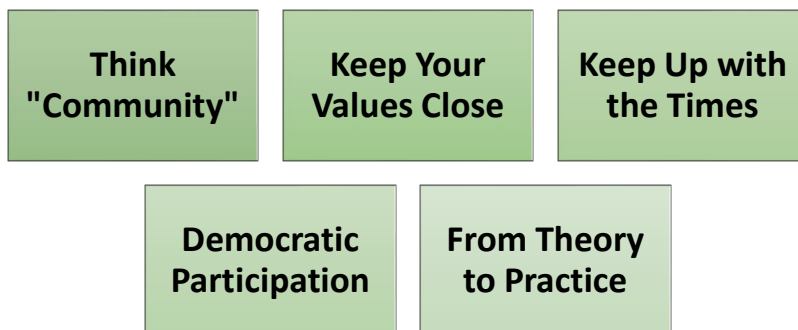
Of course, I don't blame them for their struggles; in every class I've taught, the students bring a diverse set of experiences, perspectives, and baseline levels of knowledge. Many students who end up falling behind have had poorer secondary education experiences. Unfortunately, students from marginalized communities are especially represented in the latter group. I want to be fair to those students, but I can't sacrifice my expectations of quality or standards, especially in an introduction course. These sorts of conversations about teaching rarely come up amongst my peers. In a fast-paced research environment, most professors aren't interested in discussing pedagogical questions.

Admittedly, though, I haven't considered going to one of those professional-development conferences. I hear a lot of mixed reviews; it sounds like people sitting around eating croissants, waiting for something interesting to happen. I don't want to spend an entire day at one of those events if I'm not getting anything out of it. At the end of the day, teaching isn't my main job or my main focus. I do want to improve and do better, but I would really have to be convinced that one of those events would benefit me.

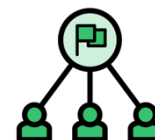
Right now, I actually browse the Internet a lot to get a better sense of other educators' perspectives. A lot of current elementary- and secondary-school educators post on places like reddit and Quora, which is useful for me to see. It's been decades since I was in school and I don't have any children to gauge experiences from. The world has changed massively since I graduated from high school in the 1970s and I would love to know more about what it's like now. Unfortunately, I don't really have the time to network anymore, so these online forums are my best option.

## Design Principles

Based on the themes in this report, the following design principles provide guidelines for designing a social initiative. While they were generated with educational communities in mind, they can be applied to any cause that involves bringing people together.



- 1) **Think “Community”:** When starting an initiative, it is important to foster a sense of community between members. This ensures that all members feel included and dedicated to the cause. A sense of closeness promotes greater trust and authentic interactions. Ultimately, this rapport facilitates the exchange of high-quality ideas and bolsters meaningful connections that will endure beyond the initiative itself.
- 2) **Keep Your Values Close:** From the beginning, an initiative should create consensus around a set of communal values, so members know what the community is advocating for. Because these values are an important contributor to the community’s identity, they should be clearly articulated.
- 3) **Keep Up with the Times:** To maximize what members are getting out of the community, an initiative should foster creativity and inspiration. Resources and ideas delivered to members should be innovative, taking a critical look at existing methods and perspectives. While being novel and experimental, they should also reflect the interests of the members.
- 4) **Democratic Participation:** Create channels of communication between all members and the leaders of the community. An initiative should gather feedback from community members and use it to inspire meaningful change. Members should be encouraged to provide constructive criticism when they see barriers. They should also be encouraged to discuss what’s working well so the community can continually improve.
- 5) **From Theory to Practice:** Members should have opportunities to apply their learning to real-world scenarios. An initiative should encourage reflection on the implications of experimental practices. This helps members better understand how to use their new tools in a supportive environment.



## Design Checklist

The design checklist attaches practical action items to each design principle:

**1. Think “Community”:** Who and what are the foundations of this community, and how will members come together?



- ☐ Identify a list of “core members” who will keep the community together operationally
- ☐ Decide how large this community needs to be and who can participate in it
- ☐ Ensure that recruitment for the community, as well as its activities and communications, are as inclusive as possible

**2. Keep Your Values Close:** What are the values holding this community together, and how are those values expressed?



- ☐ Identify a set of “core values” that all members should share
  - ☐ Document these values in a readily accessible format, for example, a manifesto that’s turned into a poster
- ☐ When planning events or activities, ensure that each aspect reflects these core values

**3. Keep Up with the Times:** Are members being provided with an innovative and enriching experience that they cannot receive elsewhere?



- ☐ Collect feedback from members on their interests as well as gaps in knowledge
- ☐ When developing materials to be delivered to all members, conduct quality research to ensure that the ideas are novel and credible

**4. Democratic Participation:** Is this a space where members are able to share their experiences and influence the culture of the community?



- ☐ Set up a system of feedback where members can anonymously provide constructive feedback
- ☐ When members speak up, ensure that their voices and experiences are acknowledged
- ☐ Regularly provide members with updates on how their activities have helped growing the community and move it forwards

**5. From Theory to Practice:** Are members learning new things and do they have opportunities to see how this new knowledge can be applied to the real world?



- ☐ When planning activities or events, ask what knowledge members already have access to and provide a space for critical conversations about those topics or for members to explore completely new topics
- ☐ If members are learning new ideas, provide and/or suggest tangible ways for them to implement these ideas in practice
  - ☐ For example, allow members to “pilot test” new techniques in a simulated environment

## “How Might We” Questions

We pose the following discussion questions as “how might we...” questions to emphasize that the report’s themes should be translated into practical actions.

- How might we encourage meaningful dialogue between educators and administrators so educator experiences are valued in the decision-making process?
- How might we increase educators’ understanding of what occurs across varied classroom levels so they can increase student preparedness?
- How might we enable educators to implement innovative learning strategies, so they feel they are evolving professionally and intellectually?
  - How might we remove resistance or barriers to innovation in the classroom so educators may expand, explore, and innovate through trial and error?
- How might we create a space that is inclusive and safe and that encourages meaningful dialogue between educators so that new ideas and perspectives can be understood and supported?
  - How might we encourage an ever-present atmosphere of social dialogue between educators, so that educators feel connected to each other and share strategies with their peers?
  - How might we facilitate everyday discussion between educators so they can collaborate on solutions to impromptu problems?
- How might we facilitate a flexible yet impactful learning community so that educators are not burdened by their additional commitments?

## Draft Recommendations

To address the ultimate goal of this project, we asked, “How can we use our findings to create a meaningful, continuous support experience for educators across diverse disciplines and educational levels?” These recommendations will help I-Think and the Innovation Hub to develop experiences that build connections between K-12 and post-secondary educators. We provide both a long-term vision of the ideal experience and several short-term actionable solutions to address current needs and frustrations.

### Long Term Possibilities:

- **The “iBus”** – Imagine a bus which picks up educators from different schools and institutions on their way to and from work. Educators would have the ability to speak with one another in a casual environment, meeting like-minded individuals across the city. This setting requires no additional time commitment from educators as they would have to commute regardless. On the bus, educators can start their day learning something new, or end it reflecting on the day’s events. Maybe one day, the bus will be taking educators to...
- **The Integrated Learning School** – A school housing students and educators from kindergarten through post-secondary. To truly embody the co-creation of learning, both students and educators will have a say in the learning environment, including syllabi, assessments, and classroom structure. As much as possible, the needs of individuals across all levels will be given equal priority. Students and educators will be incentivized and given opportunities to mentor their peers. Once per year, members of this learning community will come together in roundtables to evaluate the success of the initiative. Additional participants, such as parents and those working in industry or non-profits, can also be brought in to round out the perspectives. Overall, the activities of the school will be tailored to serve the needs of as broad a range of stakeholders as possible. Occasionally, educators may also engage in activities such as...
- **A Day in the Life** – Educators switch roles with one another for a day to gain insight into each other’s classroom lives. As a once-per-year program, A Day in the Life helps educators witness the struggles and celebrate the best practices of their peers.

## Smaller-Scale Initiatives:

As we work towards this long-term vision, we can also capture its essence through smaller-scale initiatives, such as:

- **An Annual Symposium** – Modelled after the same values as the Integrated Learning School, this symposium will bring together educators, students, parents, and policymakers in a co-design space. Participants will discuss the current and future state of education through intimate workshops led by community leaders. Whether through integrative thinking or other activities, individuals from across all levels of the educational hierarchy will come together to solve problems related to education and gain a greater appreciation of the other’s perspective. The insights from these activities can be gathered and analyzed in a report on cooperative educational decision making.
- **An Information Hub** – Combines podcasts, instructional videos (like a YouTube channel), and online outreach (for example, through Twitter, reddit) into an integrated initiative. Through the podcast, educators will keep up to date on academic research, current events, peer stories, and policy developments. The social-media channels will facilitate discussions on these topics and solicit feedback and questions. The YouTube channel will house videos answering these questions, providing details and testimonials on how different educators incorporate educational philosophies into their classrooms. Essentially, the online community acts as an information hub. To streamline the user experience, all these media and functions could be integrated into an app. Regardless of how these media come together, they should be unified under a clear brand.
- **An Online Community** – Separate from (but potentially related to) the previous idea, a social-media platform can also be used for connection, discussion, and reflection. When signing up for the online community, educators will fill out a survey regarding their needs and interests. They will then be matched to other members based on these interests. Within each smaller group, a core member will lead discussions and reflection on a guiding topic or statement. As an example, the prompt could be: “What was the most interesting thing that happened in your classroom(s) this week?” The platform would include a “time capsule” function, showing educators their entries from previous years and logging all answers to similar prompts. Educators can easily reflect on their pedagogy and how they have grown.
  - To foster ongoing collaboration with the Innovation Hub, a dedicated team of Innovation Hub designers can continuously analyze this data and produce annual reports on the community’s experiences. This repository can inform research, which may encourage policy changes. Of course, educators may opt in or out of data collection.
- **A Co-working Space for Educators** – Inspired by industry trends, this space could act as an “incubator” for educators, where they will have the opportunity to engage in mentorship, networking, and workshops. It could also provide a transition point for part-time, substitute, and aspiring educators to be surrounded by an inspiring and supportive environment. All educators can visit this space to learn, do their work (for example, grade assignments), or meet with peers.

## Limitations and Next Steps

The insights in this report were generated from interview data only, and no classroom observations were conducted. While this gave us detailed insight into educators' beliefs and frustrations, we do not know how these ideas translate into their teaching.

Also, all interviewees had either work history with I-Think or a personal connection to one of the researchers, so they may not constitute a representative sample. All exhibited passion for experimentation, innovation, and real-world problem solving. It is unclear how these values will generalize to a larger population.

Lastly, no students or administrators were interviewed. Their perspectives would be valuable, considering the emphasis placed on community and cohesion.

Nevertheless, we found reproducible insights among our participants. Moving forward, future investigations could examine how students, parents, administrators, policymakers, or other stakeholders approach the issues in this report. Doing so would provide more perspectives for regulatory bodies, such as the Ministry of Education, and social innovators to consider. It would also ensure that future interventions address a broad range of needs.

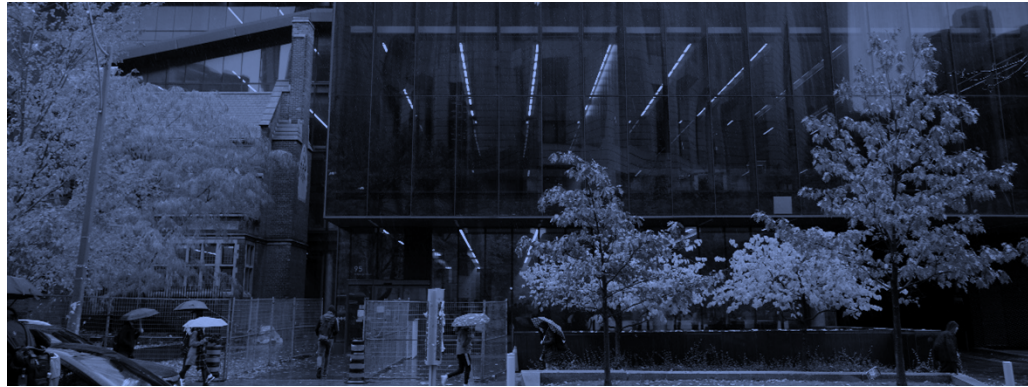
## Conclusion

In this collaboration, the Innovation Hub and I-Think Initiative learned about the challenges and successes faced by educators as they build professional communities and improve education. We conclude that social enterprises should foster genuine connections based upon shared values. Both formal and informal communities can support educators and help them experiment with new teaching methods. To further connect educators across K–12 and post-secondary, a creative and inclusive network would help them learn from each other and better plan for students' futures.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1) What resources are available to enhance educator communities within schools and among educational organizations?
- 2) What are the possible barriers to implementing these solutions, and how might they be addressed?
- 3) How would this experience or initiative scale if required?

## Student Contributors

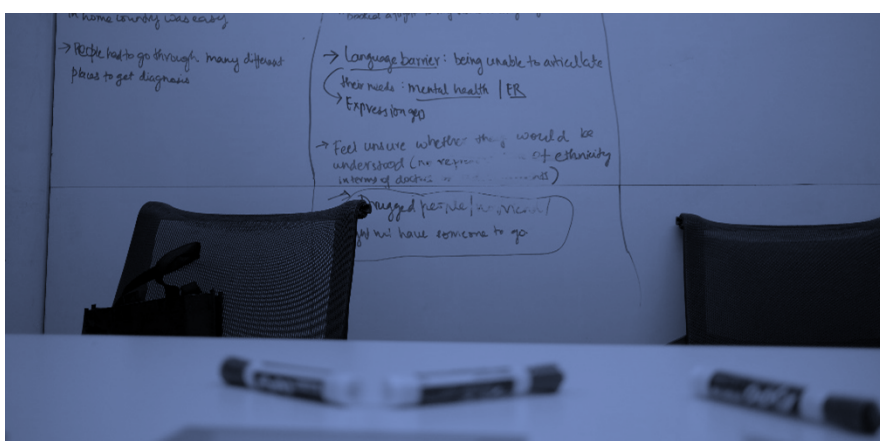


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