

The futility of PLC Lite



The professional learning community process, properly executed, can deliver dramatically improved teaching and learning. But too often it's followed incorrectly and gains to materialize.

By Rick DuFour and Douglas Reeves

Although many schools around the world have claimed to embrace the professional learning community (PLC) process, it would be more accurate to describe the current state of affairs in many schools as PLC Lite. Educators rename their traditional faculty or department meetings as PLC meetings, engage in book studies that result in no action, or devote collaborative time to topics that have no effect on student achievement — all in the name of the PLC process. These activities fail to embrace the central tenets of the PLC process and won't lead to higher levels of learning for students or adults.

When educators are working in a school that is truly a PLC, they recognize they must:

- #1. Work together in collaborative teams rather than in isolation and take collective responsibility for student learning.
- #2. Establish a guaranteed and viable curriculum that specifies the knowledge, skills, and dispositions students are expected to acquire, unit by unit.

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- #3. Use an assessment process that includes frequent, team-developed, common formative assessments based on the guaranteed and viable curriculum.
- #4. Use the results of common formative assessments to:
 - Identify students who need additional time and support for learning.
 - Identify students who would benefit from enriched or extended learning.
 - Identify and address areas of individual strengths or weaknesses in teaching based on the evidence of student learning.
 - Identify and address areas where none of the team members were able to bring students to the desired level of proficiency.
- #5. Create a system of interventions that guarantees that students who struggle receive additional time and support in ways that do not remove them from new direct instruction, regardless of the teacher to whom they have been assigned.

The four questions

An excellent test for distinguishing between a genuine PLC and a school engaged in PLC Lite is the school's attention to the four questions that drive the work of collaborative teams in a PLC:

- #1. What do we want students to learn?**
- #2. How will we know if they have learned it?**
- #3. What will we do if they have not learned it?**
- #4. How will we provide extended learning opportunities for students who have mastered the content?**

While the wording of these questions varies slightly among PLC researchers, the essence of the questions is nearly identical. We recommend that faculty members keep a very simple one-page protocol that helps them focus on these questions. Meetings that only address standards, that focus entirely on disciplinary issues and parent complaints, or that center on employee issues may be very interesting, but they do not represent the work of high-performing PLCs.

Common formative assessments

The best teachers are constantly checking for student understanding almost minute by minute as they teach. They direct questions to randomly selected students, check on student work as they move around the room, and use whiteboards, clickers, and exit slips to gather evidence of student learning to help them determine how to proceed with instruction. Students also use this evidence to assess their own understanding. This type of ongoing formative assessment has

repeatedly been proven to have a powerful effect on student learning.

There are times, however, when a collaborative team should collectively gather evidence of student learning in a more formal assessment process such as written tests or performance-based assessments. These assessments can also be formative if:

- They're used to identify students who aren't yet able to demonstrate proficiency;
- Those students receive additional time and support for learning through a timely process of systematic intervention that never removes them from new direct instruction;
- Students have another opportunity to demonstrate what they have learned; and
- Teachers use the evidence of student learning to inform and improve their individual and collective professional practice.

School systems have paid dearly for many assessments that masquerade as formative assessments. Calling them uninformative assessments would be more accurate. Genuine formative assessments are intellectually owned by the teachers who created them, are directly related to classroom instruction, and naturally lead to conversations about intervention for students and the effectiveness of different instructional practices. Uninformative assessments lead to an entirely different conversation which, briefly stated, concludes with, "Thank goodness that's over — now we can go back to what we were doing."

Formative assessments not only align with instruction and academic standards but also extend beyond traditional test preparation that too frequently dominates classroom time. For example, even if state tests are largely based on multiple-choice questions, effective common formative assessments can require writing, communication, collaboration, problem solving, and critical thinking in ways that are far more challenging than traditional tests. The job of teachers in this case is not to mimic state tests but to challenge students to show what they know in ways that exceed traditional tests.

Data analysis

A major distinction between true PLCs and schools engaged in PLC Lite is how the schools use data that are intended to reflect evidence of student learning. Many PLC Lite schools have no process for collective analysis of student learning. As a result, groups of teachers spend their time discussing student behavior ("Should we allow students to bring their cell phones into class") or sharing preferences about how they teach a skill or concept ("I have always taught it this way"). In other PLC Lite schools,

the teaching group may look at data but only use them to assign students to intervention and not as a basis for discussions of instructional practice. They fall into the routine of teach, test, hope for the best, assign students to intervention, and move on with business as usual.

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In a true PLC, collaborative teams of teachers use evidence of student learning as a basis for collective inquiry into instructional practice. The conversation moves beyond war stories and personal preferences to explore which practices are leading to superior results. On these teams, the dialogue is more likely to be, “I see that your students consistently demonstrate high levels of proficiency when we assess the ability to compare and contrast. What strategies, practices, or materials are you using to get these great results?” Reflective teaching is powerful when it is done collectively rather than in isolation and when it is based on actual evidence of student learning (Hattie, 2009). Any school that is not using the results of team-developed common formative assessments to improve professional practice is not yet fully engaged in the PLC process.

Perhaps the worst examples of faux data analysis are the unfortunately named “war rooms” in which district leaders display data from the previous year’s state tests and use this as a vehicle to publicly praise and humiliate principals and faculty members. This is what military veterans call “fighting the last war.” The most effective examples of data analyses involve not the scores from the previous year but rather from the previous unit. Most important, this is not an exercise in “looking at data” as if we were looking at strange animals in the zoo. The best examples of data analysis lead to specific actions by teachers and administrators so that an examination of the data leads to interventions and changes in instruction, feedback, and support.

Interventions

Virtually every school claims that its mission is to help all students learn, but the relevant question to ask is, “What happens in your school when students don’t learn what you have deemed is essential?” The least effective response to this question is that students must repeat a grade or a course. In some states, 3rd graders who fail a state standardized test must

repeat the grade. The research is overwhelmingly against retention, but facts are merely an annoyance to those with strongly held opinions. We only suggest that every legislator who thinks that retention is a good idea should be required to chaperone the 7th-grade dance in which 16-year-olds are part of the student body.

The most effective interventions are not the repetition of previous unsuccessful teaching; rather, they employ systematic, intensive, focused, and immediate individual or small-group instruction. For example, we’ve observed districts in which schools identify students each week who are missing homework, failing tests, or otherwise being unsuccessful. Imagine how the stress level of teachers, students, administrators, and parents would be reduced if students went into every weekend with projects and homework up to date and with satisfactory performance in every class.

These interventions may not be perfect, but they are dramatically better than retention or leaving the issue of how to respond when students don’t learn to each teacher to resolve on his or her own. These interventions do more than improve student success; they also dramatically improve faculty morale. Imagine what next year would be like if we had fewer repeaters and more elective classes. It might begin to restore the joy of teaching and the reason most teachers entered the profession: to make a positive difference in the lives of students.

Real PLCs

We urge schools to avoid labeling themselves as PLCs without engaging in the hard work that goes into becoming a PLC. Too many schools have adopted the label without committing to the substance of the professional learning community processes. Specifically, educators must focus on the four questions of PLCs as an integral part of their meetings, use common formative assessments in a way that has a specific effect on teaching and learning, and analyze data not as a way to humiliate teachers but rather as a way to elevate the learning of students and faculty members. Finally, real PLCs include specific interventions that lead to measurable improvements in student performance. When the PLC process is implemented deeply and sustained over time, schools can experience dramatic improvement in learning by both students and adults. PLC Lite is an exercise in futility that helps neither students nor the educational systems that serve them. ■

Reference

Hattie, J. (2009). *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to student achievement*. New York, NY: Routledge.

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