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GAVIN GRIFT

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**Professional Learning
Communities in Practice**

Session 1

MELBOURNE

GAVIN GRIFT

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Gavin is the author of numerous articles and books, including *Assessing the Whole Child* (2007), *Teachers as Architects of Learning* (2013) and *Transformative Talk: Cognitive Coaches Share Their Stories* (2014). As a Centre for Professional Learning Communities (CPLC) training associate, he led the establishment of a PLC network within Australian schools. Gavin also serves as a training associate for Thinking Collaborative, which is the home of both Cognitive Coaching and Adaptive Schools.

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C O M M I T M E N T 1

Understand what it means to be a PLC

A professional learning community is a group of connected and engaged professionals who are responsible for driving change and improvement within, between and across schools that will directly benefit learners.

– Alma Harris and Michelle Jones (2010, p. 173)

As more and more PLCs are established within schools across Australia, the first priority of school leaders is to develop an understanding of why and how this approach provides the best results when it comes to whole-school improvement. In striving to build an understanding of the process and purpose of a PLC, Australian schools can take the first of many steps on the PLC journey towards achieving high levels of learning for all students.

KEY ACTIONS

Three key actions are essential to understanding what it means to be a PLC:

- **ACTION 1.1:** Understand the purpose of a PLC
- **ACTION 1.2:** Understand the PLC process
- **ACTION 1.3:** Understand where professional learning sits within the PLC context

ACTION 1.1: UNDERSTAND THE PURPOSE OF A PLC

Why? This simple but powerful question sits at the heart of courageous PLC leadership. Sinek (2009), who is internationally renowned for his work on leadership, shared the following insight during a popular TED Talk:

Every single person, every single organization on the planet knows what they do, 100 per cent. Some know how they do it ... But very, very few people or organizations know why they do what they do. By 'why', I mean: What's your purpose? What's your cause? What's your belief? Why does your organization exist? Why do you get out of bed in the morning? And why should anyone care?

TRANSFORMATIVE COLLABORATION: Five commitments for leading a PLC

Unfortunately, many Australian educators continue to operate in school communities that lack a sense of purpose in relation to student learning. School leaders can become so preoccupied by bureaucratic and accountability concerns that they never quite find the time to contemplate – let alone commit to – what their school's mission and vision might be in relation to the students it supposedly serves. The problem with this lack of direction is vividly portrayed by Lewis Carroll (2014) in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* when Alice encounters the Cheshire Cat at a fork in the road and seeks his advice about which route to take:

'Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?'

'That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,' said the Cat.

'I don't much care where –' said Alice.

'Then it doesn't matter which way you go,' said the Cat.

The point is that until Alice decides upon the purpose of her journey, she cannot know which road will take her in the direction she wants to go. There are many schools in Australia today that function like Alice in this moment: caught at the fork in the road, they are suspended in a holding pattern, too tentative or too distracted to make a commitment to change. Absent of the sense of purpose required to make informed decisions, these conventional schools often end up choosing the road dictated by external stakeholders, system leaders and policymakers. As a result, they remain teacher-centric, curriculum-centric and compliance-centric to the point of inertia. While school leaders and teachers struggle to meet the never-ending challenges meted out by external educational authorities, students – supposedly the heart and soul of the school system – are all but forgotten.

In contrast to the directionlessness that often characterises conventional schools, every PLC shares the same foundational purpose: *high levels of learning for all students*. In this way, PLCs place student learning at the centre of both the day-to-day operations of the school and its larger vision for transformative collaboration. What's more, unlike the top-down approach to improvement common in conventional schools, in a PLC all participants in the school community have a role to play in making high levels of learning a reality of all students.

- **SCHOOL LEADERS** need to understand how to engineer supportive conditions so that teachers and students can focus on the core business of learning.
- **TEACHERS** need to understand how to engage in the collaborative enterprise of monitoring and improving curriculum, assessment and instruction to support student learning.
- **STUDENTS** need to understand implicitly that their school will not fail them.
- **PARENTS** need to understand that the school is constantly reviewing practices and structures to ensure that all students will be successful learners.

COMMITMENT 1: Understand what it means to be a PLC

Only when there is community-wide agreement about the fundamental purpose of a PLC – high levels of learning for all students – can there be a clear direction and agreed-upon practices that build collective capacity and collective action. As a result, the leader who commits to this clear purpose, communicates it to staff members, connects it to concrete actions and personifies it through everyday leadership behaviours is already a step ahead on the road to transformative collaboration.

ACTION 1.2: UNDERSTAND THE PLC PROCESS

What PLCs advocate is the migration away from our traditionally independent, isolated, individualist paradigm towards a truly collaborative and integrated organisation with student learning at its heart. But how is this goal to be achieved? What does the process look like, and what can schools expect? If you are a school leader starting the journey of transforming your organisation into a PLC, the following priorities are imperative when it comes to building the capacity for transformation:

- create a schoolwide culture
- establish effective collaborative teams
- use evidence to improve teaching and learning

CREATE A SCHOOLWIDE CULTURE

School culture has been defined as ‘the deeper level of basic assumptions and beliefs that are shared by members of an organization, that operate unconsciously, and that define in a basic ‘take-for-granted’ fashion an organization’s view of itself and its environment’ (Schein 1985, p. 6). A school’s culture is the lens through which the daily work of educators is viewed and evaluated. Simply put, school culture is ‘the way we do things around here’.

In the past, school culture has been one of the most neglected aspects of the school improvement process. For many decades, it has been written off as the exclusive domain of the school leader or leadership team, whose responsibility it is to single-handedly create the culture necessary to drive improvement. When this occurs, an unhealthy mindset of isolation and dependency starts to infiltrate the school. Teachers begin to perceive themselves as followers rather than as leaders of learning, and this perpetuates a culture of maintaining the status quo and discourages meaningful change.

In contrast, PLCs put culture at the heart of continuous improvement so that it becomes the platform on which educational innovation is anchored. PLC leaders emphasise innovation and renewal by prioritising interactions that build high levels of professional trust and collective capacity in order to have an impact on teacher practice and student achievement. As DuFour

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and Mattos (2013) recognise, the most powerful way to improve both teaching and learning 'is not by micromanaging instruction, but by creating the collaborative culture and collective responsibility of a professional learning community'. As the collective understanding of PLCs matures within a school, the school continually sharpens its focus on learning to improve student achievement.

In Australia, the importance of school culture is recognised by the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL 2012) in its *Australian charter for professional learning of teachers and school leaders*. AITSL states that a high-quality school culture has the following elements:

- a high degree of leadership support for ongoing adult learning and risk taking
- collective responsibility for improving practice
- disciplined collaboration aimed at specific and relevant goals that relate to the learning needs of students
- high levels of trust, interaction and interdependence
- support for professional learning through school structures, explicit planning and the allocation of time
- a focus on the professional learning that is most likely to be effective in improving professional practice and student outcomes (p. 3)

These elements serve as useful markers in a PLC leader's efforts to monitor the evolution of the school's collaborative culture.

ESTABLISH EFFECTIVE COLLABORATIVE TEAMS

A key tenet of PLCs is the establishment of collaborative teams. Educators within a PLC form smaller collaborative teams, which then meet on a regular basis to share knowledge, analyse data and generate new ways of functioning in order to best support the learning of students they serve. Collaborative teams 'may be various sizes, include members with similar or different roles or responsibilities, and meet frequently face-to-face, virtually, or through a combination' (Learning Forward 2015), but they are always guided by the premise that only through sustained collaborative work can schools achieve their mission of high levels of learning for all.

In conventional schools, teacher teams have traditionally operated based on a combination of two styles of interpersonal engagement: *coordination* and *collegiality*. To coordinate as a team is to organise diverse elements together in a congruous operation. Teacher teams coordinate in school communities to achieve valuable goals, as in the staging of a sports carnival or arts festival. When coordination is the dominant approach, each teacher has an allocated and specific role that is performed in isolation but contributes to the success of the event.

COMMITMENT 1: Understand what it means to be a PLC

As an example, consider the following scenario highlighting a coordination approach:

A year-level collaborative team is meeting to devise a new set of assessment tasks. There are five teachers in the team, and each teacher designs one question to contribute to the formative assessment task. Because this team tends towards a coordination-based engagement style, the teachers design their contributions in isolation, and then the five discrete assessment activities are collected and combined into one long assessment task. The task is completed, but there is only a minimum of common understanding as to the learning targets, criteria and marking rubric.

The collegial style of engagement prioritises strong professional relationships between fellow educators. Collegiality is conducive to a friendly and respectful environment that promotes goodwill among colleagues. However, it can also be counterproductive, as in this scenario:

A year-level collaborative team is meeting to devise a new set of assessment tasks. Vanesh, an experienced teacher, presents a task from the previous year's paper without any adjustments. The task does not relate to the new learning targets or success criteria. The other members of the team recognise it as one of Vanesh's recycled favourite tasks, which he has included many times previously because it is quick to mark and keeps the students busy. The other team members accept Vanesh's assessment task despite its lack of relevance because they do not want to jeopardise their personal and professional relationships with him and the other members of the team.

Needless to say, there will be many times when teachers still need to coordinate and act collegially in order to successfully provide the services required of them. In a conventional school, however, these forms of interaction may perpetuate isolated, solution-driven professional practices that offer the promise of a quick fix but cannot provide sustained solutions. In contrast, PLCs explicitly focus on creating the conditions for positive collective inquiry through *collaboration*: an intentional way of interacting with the aim of improving professional practice in order to achieve and sustain better outcomes for learners. DuFour et al. (2007) explain that

in a PLC, collaboration represents a systematic process in which teachers work together interdependently in order to impact their classroom practice in ways that will lead to better results for their students, for their team, and for their school. (p. 3)

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The practice of collaboration dictates that to have a transformative impact on learning, educational professionals need to work together in new ways, using new skills and new understandings to move beyond coordination and collegiality into the collaborative construction of new learning. The following scenario shows how this might look:

A year-level collaborative team is meeting to devise a new set of assessment tasks. Because their school has recently embarked on the journey towards becoming a PLC, the teachers in the team are aware of how important it is to gather useful formative data about what students are learning. They begin their task by collectively revisiting the curriculum in order to refresh their understanding of the knowledge and skills that their students need to learn. They identify the key learning goals that the assessment tasks will measure and work together to create a set of integrated tasks based on the learning goals. At their next meeting, a week later, the teachers set aside time to revisit their assessment tasks and establish a common marking rubric that they will each use to guide the marking process. When the team collates the data from each team member, they are able to establish clear areas of strength and weakness that they can use for future collaborative planning.

Collaborative teams that set realistic, evidence-based learning goals and work continually to improve student learning become the living embodiment of the school improvement plan (DuFour & Fullan 2013). In order to make this transformation a reality, however, teams must attend to a third aspect of the PLC process: using evidence to improve teaching and learning.

USE EVIDENCE TO IMPROVE TEACHING AND LEARNING

To transform an existing teacher team into a high-functioning collaborative team, the team must begin the powerful process of using evidence to improve learning. According to Dinham (2008), 'professional learning needs to be built upon an evidential foundation of what works in teaching, not fad, fantasy, idealism, ideology or rhetoric'.

The evidence collaborative teams collect on an ongoing basis provides the impetus for teachers to inquire into best practice. This evidence centres on student learning achievement without exception.

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In schools where PLCs thrive, teams adopt a results-orientated approach to achieve their purpose of ensuring high levels of learning for all students. Consequently, collaborative team meetings in a PLC routinely involve discussion of questions such as those recommended by Harris and Jones (2012) in an AITSL document on collaboration in professional learning, which is central to a PLC:

- What is the evidence telling us about the new strategies we are using?
- Does the feedback require that we make some adjustment or refinement to the strategies?
- Does the feedback fit what we anticipated or what we already know, or are there some challenges to our thinking?
- Are we able to agree a shared and clear view of what the trial is telling us?
- Can we agree on a way forward? (p. 20)

Ultimately, if data indicates that the team's collaboration efforts have not resulted in improved outcomes for students, then the team has to question whether it was focused on the right instruction, assessment or intervention to begin with. The below scenario illustrates how this situation might play out in a PLC:

Lena, the experienced deputy principal of a large secondary school, has long been the school's designated point of contact for external standardised assessments. Each year, she ensures that the standardised assessments are administered correctly to each cohort, and then she waits to receive the final results of state and national tests. Within her annual schedule, she assigns blocks of undisturbed time to meticulously unpack and analyse the data. The analysis is a lengthy process, but Lena takes pleasure in it because mathematics is her specialist teaching area. She prioritises this responsibility and feels highly accountable in her role as interpreter of the data for the school community.

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Once the standardised assessment data has been scrutinised, Lena calls a meeting of the heads of department to inform them about the academic trends revealed by the data and share her professional insights. The heads of department then return to their departmental teams and communicate the data trends to their teaching staff. Students who have scored below the minimum standard are identified and assigned to a remediation group for the next semester, then they are monitored every term for improvement.

Lena has been disseminating data in this manner for many years. She believes her method to be quick and efficient, and it meets her accountability requirements at a system level. Heads of department are appreciative of Lena's expertise in data literacy, as they feel that they lack the skills to interpret the data accurately.

As time goes by, this culture of data dissemination – in which information is passed from Lena to the heads of department and then from department heads to the teaching staff – becomes deeply embedded in the school. At the same time, however, it becomes increasingly apparent that despite Lena's hard work and dedication, the students' results show no improvement. In fact, student performance is noticeably declining in certain learning areas, including Lena's own mathematics department. What's more, the students identified to receive remediation are the same students year after year, in what appears to be an eternal cycle of intervention.

Anxious about how to turn this predicament around, the school's leadership team begins to investigate the possibility of developing a set of questions designed to support each collaborative team to analyse their own formative and summative assessment data. Many staff members are hesitant, but two departmental teams agree to trial the set of data questions, which include inquiry into assessment design, delivery and relevance.

The teams agree to focus on sharing wisdom rather than making judgements about the data. As they become more confident in using the questions, they begin to share insights about the data with their colleagues in other departments. Over time, they build on their understanding of the data by swapping teaching strategies and ideas about instruction, differentiation and formative assessment practices. When members of one team start to observe one another's instruction in the classroom environment, a few other departments recognise this as a good idea and also begin to observe each other's practice in their area of instruction.

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Although the new method is a success when it comes to fostering collaboration between teachers, it soon becomes apparent that professional learning is required to improve data literacy skills across the middle-management team. To deal with this issue, Lena asks two other teachers of mathematics to co-facilitate a series of professional learning sessions to help staff refine their skills in this area. The sessions are well-attended, and teachers express a sense of increased confidence in discussing student progress because they now share a common understanding of the evidence. Meanwhile, as each department begins to spend more common planning time unwrapping student data, they start to generate some simple but manageable forms of intervention targeted at the specific needs of these students, maximising the additional time and support they are being given.

Lena initially finds it extremely challenging to release the school's data to other teachers. As she observes the progress of the collaborative teams, however, she is excited to see the difference it makes in terms of the conversations that she hears about learning. Increasingly, she notices that the teachers are discussing student learning growth with a heightened sense of positivity and encouragement. As Lena no longer has to invest significant time in analysing whole-school data, she chooses to use that time to visit departmental team meetings. To keep her finger on the data pulse, she attends at least one meeting a fortnight and engages in data conversations with that team. It does not take long before student achievement begins noticeably to increase.

This scenario is typical of many teams. It demonstrates that increasing data literacy through collaboration is a high-leverage practice that improves the integrity of the assessment design process; the quality of teacher feedback; the efficiency of student-data analysis; and, ultimately, student results.

ACTION 1.3: UNDERSTAND PROFESSIONAL LEARNING WITHIN THE PLC CONTEXT

A growing body of educational research indicates that the most effective teacher learning activities – those that have the biggest impact on student achievement – involve forms of job-embedded professional learning (Coggshall et al. 2012). Like their colleagues throughout the world, Australian educators are quickly recognising that the establishment and development of effective professional learning is their best hope for sustained improvement in student outcomes. Collaborating on areas critical to teacher development is becoming more commonplace.

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While there is nothing new about teachers working together, there is a new understanding about the conditions necessary to support this collective engagement. Specifically, there is a visible shift in educational best practice from professional development, in which teachers are positioned as the passive recipients of predetermined knowledge or skills, to professional learning, which requires that teachers take an active role in the co-construction of professional knowledge. In a recent paper for AITSL, Mayer and Lloyd (2011) make a point of noting this distinction:

One issue that needs clarification at the outset is the use of the terms professional development and professional learning ... Various authors have, for some time now, been critical of professional development conceived of as something that one 'does', or that is 'provided', or is 'done to' teachers, and that has promoted the notion that it must be closely tied to the context of teaching and the capacities of teachers ... The shift in terminology away from professional development, as noted in jurisdictions across Australia, may well reside in these perceptions and the presumed 'baggage' associated with poorly conceived, fragmented, one-shot and de-contextualised 'in-service workshops'. (p. 3)

This perspective is supported by the Canadian educational researcher Fullan (2007), who writes in no uncertain terms that 'we must abandon professional development and make professional learning an everyday experience for all educators' (p. 36). In Australia as elsewhere, professional development is being subsumed by the more cohesive and dynamic approach that is professional learning.

It is well-established that the conventional approach of professional development rarely leads to schoolwide change. In contrast, the PLC approach of professional learning reveals the way in which collective capacity can be harnessed to improve teacher quality throughout the entire school community. Professional learning in a PLC becomes a shared enterprise that is generated by and belongs to the whole school community. Although school leaders remain necessary to coordinate professional learning and maintain enthusiasm for the work, they must also relinquish some control over the process by inviting all members of the community to assume mutual responsibility for ongoing school-based inquiry. The primary aim for leaders of effective PLCs should be to empower other professionals to learn. For this reason, as Fullan (2011) remarks, professional learning in a PLC is a never-ending journey of continuous improvement.

REFLECTION

The key message in this chapter is that it takes informed, knowledgeable leadership to effect the changes required to become a PLC. To lead a successful PLC, a leader must grasp the

COMMITMENT 1: Understand what it means to be a PLC

purpose and process of becoming a PLC as well as the role of professional learning. An effective PLC leader has a deep yet ever-evolving understanding of what it means to be a PLC and is able to leverage this knowledge to engineer the conditions for transformation to occur.

For leaders seeking to develop their understanding of what it means to be a PLC, it may help to envisage leading the PLC process as analogous to the spinning of a orb-weaver spider's web. The spider must sense a change in vibration before the first strand can be reeled successfully, then this initial strand is immediately strengthened with several strong radials and continuously fortified with circular threads. Similarly, leaders who embark on the PLC process do so because they are responding to identifiable gaps in student achievement. The centre of the web is fused together by data, and all PLC actions and interactions radiate as a direct response to that data. Once the first elements of the PLC are in place, the leader fortifies them by providing the school culture and structures necessary for success.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

COMMITMENT 1: UNDERSTAND WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A PLC

As you consider each reflective question, contemplate your response and identify the evidence that supports your thinking.

Action 1.1: Understand the purpose of a PLC

- a. How might you explain what you do to ensure high levels of learning for all students at your school?
- b. What's your belief on how student learning can become a central focus in your leadership?

Action 1.2: Understand the PLC process

- a. What does a high-functioning PLC look like, feel like and sound like?
- b. How can you reallocate your school's resources to engineer the conditions for teachers to analyse data, plan instruction and adjust practices collaboratively?

Action 1.3: Understand professional learning within the PLC context

- a. What steps can you take to ensure professional learning is job-embedded in your school?
- b. In what ways might the collaborative teams lead the next phase of professional learning in your school?
- c. How will you broker the resources and support for job-embedded professional learning to thrive?

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I N S I G H T S F R O M T H E F I E L D

“ I reckon the PLC process just flows on from team teaching. I always like to work with people and share ideas, and the PLC is just building on that but making it more formal so that it's something you actually follow. I think collaboration arises from the way the teams are selected to work together, so that they've got different skills. It's best to have people in a team with a variety of different skills and different talents, not only to share the responsibility but to see things from a different perspective. That we trust one another is the thing.

Working in a PLC has made the academic side of things more stringent. We have our essential standards, and all our planning comes directly from that. Before we would come in and go, 'I want something pretty to put up on the wall,' but now we make sure the kids are aware of the reason that we're asking them to complete these tasks.

I am really in tune to what the kids do know and what they don't know. It used to be that when we'd taught something, we'd taught it, and if the kids weren't listening then bad luck – but now we're really encouraging the children to have more ownership of their learning. Doing it as a whole school, everyone's on the same wavelength. ”

- JESSICA, YEAR 6 TEACHER

“ In our PLC, we want student learning to be an ongoing developmental learning process that everybody has ownership of. One of the things that was important to us from the very early days was that it couldn't be a top-down process and we needed everybody to be involved. By asking people to contribute and talk about what it is they did or didn't understand, we keep the lines of communication open. The ownership had to come back to all of us. I think that's really important.

Ultimately, it really isn't about the teaching. It really has become more about the learning. 'They haven't got it, I need to do something – we need to do something so that these kids have learnt it.' We used to say, 'This is the way I'm going to do it, and bad luck if you don't get it,' but now it's a case of, 'Well, they didn't get it this way, so what other ways can I do it?' Teachers can try different methods and then compare the results they've got with results from other teachers. I think the power to become a better teacher is driven by the data, and driven by the collaborative team approach as well. ”

- IVY, ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL

COMMITMENT 1: Understand what it means to be a PLC

“ We had a lot of discussions early on about the culture of the school. What was the background of the clientele coming to the school? What were teachers observing in their classrooms? What was the best way to move kids forward? Where were the best opportunities for kids? Every answer to these questions came back to learning. Learning was a pathway through poverty and disadvantage. It was a fairly big impetus for staff that if we wanted to help these kids, it wouldn't be the fluffy stuff that we needed to do. We needed to do the core learning stuff, because that's actually their way out of poverty.

Our kids give feedback to the teachers now. They point out when the learning goals aren't actually learning-focused. ”

- CHRIS, PRINCIPAL

“ The PLC transformation has been a steep learning curve. In the past, our whole focus was redoing the school and a lot of building stuff. That was more of a focus than curriculum and student learning, which was often just ad hoc. The PLC process has definitely rejuvenated me as a principal in that I now understand where we're going, what we're trying to do and why we're trying to do it. I've got a greater purpose as an educational leader. I'm more involved in student learning than I was previously.

I enjoy seeing that we're heading in the right direction, and I enjoy the fact that I think most staff are pretty committed to it. I think staff members who leave here now and apply for a job anywhere else are going to be much better prepared because they can actually talk about how you improve student learning. It gives you the 'how' rather than 'I'll do this and it might help', so I think they're better placed. ”

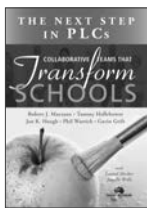
- DREW, PRINCIPAL

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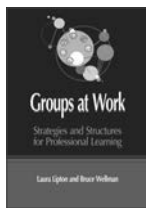
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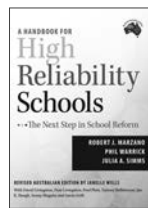
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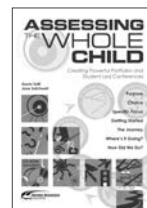
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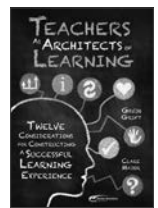
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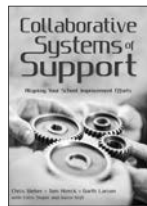
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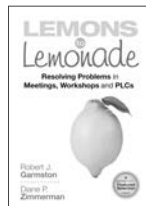
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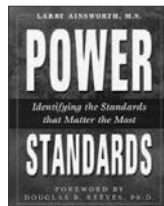
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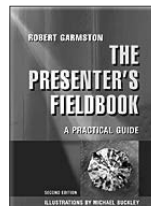
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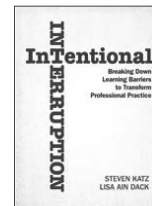
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