PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES BY DESIGN

Putting the LEARNING Back Into PLCs

LOIS BROWN EASTON

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Introduction

Design. The word is almost magical. It conjures buildings such as Gaudi's masterpiece the Sagrada Família in Barcelona, the music of the Bs (Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Bartok, Beatles), the poetry of Neruda, the silhouette of *David*, Monet's *Water Lilies*. These have *design* in terms of their coherence.

As designs, they emerged from the passion, purposes, environment, and life experiences of their designers, as well as the media with which they were working. What might have been chaos became coherent. The stone found its sculpture, the notes their music, the syllables their pattern. What was messy found order.

Design. As a verb, the word has another meaning. It refers to the effort of planning, making something happen "the way it should." It connotes control, often from outside the environment, as people devise steps ("The Seven Steps to . . .") or a formula ("If you do *X*, *Y* will happen"). The implication is that there is a right way to work toward a right outcome (and, conversely, a wrong way and a wrong outcome).

PLCs By Design. In this book, *design* refers to the process of finding coherence, what works in a particular environment. It is about purpose and what furthers purpose. Design is not engineered nor imposed from the outside. It is neither a formula nor a set of foolproof steps. Design is open to opportunity. So, if you're looking for a magic formula for creating PLCs that are guaranteed to lead to improved student learning, this is not the book for you. If you are looking for guidelines toward coherence and achievement of purpose; if you are willing to study the messiness of real life; if you are interested in distilling lessons from learning and apply those lessons to your own environment, as they fit—this is the book for you.

Professional Learning Communities. Humans have a need to make meaning, connect, and grow (Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1996, p. 36), so we create organizations. We are, mostly, disappointed in the organizations we create. Wheatley suggests that we may have the best intentions in mind and, at first, our organizations may achieve those intentions: "We see a need. We join with others. We find the necessary information or resources. We respond creatively, quickly. We create a solution that works" (p. 37).

What goes wrong? We interfere with the most natural of organizations—a "self-organizing" organization—and "build rigid structures incapable of responding. We box ourselves in behind hard boundaries . . ." (p. 37). Our analytic culture forces us to try to control each another. So, we invent sure-fire steps or magical formulae; we mechanize what is natural. Often, these steps or formulae are imposed from the outside, insensitive to our own passion, purposes, environment, and life experiences.

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Steps and formulae are beguiling. It is too hard to "dare to describe the true fuzziness, the unexpected turns, the bursts of creative insight" that are part of self-organizing organizations (p. 37). It is better to "pretend that we were in control every step of the way" (p. 37). We prefer to talk about "executing plans" rather than reveling in surprises (p. 37).

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are a good example of a good idea that might go bad. They startled the education world in the 1990s—at once seeming both promising and commonsensical: "Of course! Learning communities of educators! In a learning institution. Why not?" The first PLCs were probably stellar examples of self-organizing organizations, started by people who saw a need, joined with others, and found what they needed to respond creatively (p. 37).

Some PLCs remain self-organizing and vibrant. Some early PLCs have disappeared in disappointment, however. Some have become regulated. And, some never had the chance to self-organize. They emerged according to someone else's dictate, a result of easy-to-follow steps and uncompromising principles. The whole concept of PLC today is under fire. To many, *PLC* is just another name for "business as usual."

The premise of this book is that PLCs *as a concept* are still worthy and, as school-based organizations, can make a difference for students. However, PLCs need to be self-organizing. They need to be created and find coherence as self-organizing organizations according to purpose, passion, and environment.

I am not proposing anarchy. In fact, self-organization guarantees that anarchy won't last long. I am not proposing that we cede to chaos. I am proposing that we examine PLCs from the point of view of the muck of messiness that shapes itself into coherence. While I'm not going to offer prescriptions in this book, I am going to offer insights and "lessons learned" about the way PLCs develop, structure themselves, mature, and sustain themselves.

Structure emerges from self-organization. Wheatley maintains, "We work with what is available and encourage forms to come forth. We foster tinkering and discovery. We help create connections. We nourish with information. We stay clear about what we want to accomplish. We remember that people self-organize and trust them to do so" (p. 38). Instead of providing specific steps, we "provide what [people] need to do to begin their work" (p. 38). The structure springs "from the process of doing the work. These structures will be useful but temporary" (p. 38).

We do not "do to" people; we help people "do for themselves most of what in the past has been done to them" so that they can "design what is necessary to do the work. They agree on behaviors and relationships that make sense to them" (p. 38).

What do we most need to be self-organizing? We need to be learners. We need to learn.

Learning. The middle word, the **central** word, in *PLC* is *learning*. Although the other words are important—educators are professional and community is important—it is **learning** that helps us self-organize to achieve coherence and purpose. Wheatley notes that "fuzzy, messy, continuously exploring systems bent on discovering what works are far more practical and successful than our attempts at efficiency" (p. 25). We must be mindful, attentive to "what's available" and "what's possible" (p. 25). Learning means that we "slosh around in the mess, involve many individuals, encourage discoveries, and move quickly past mistakes" (p. 25). We must be "learning all the time, engaging everyone in finding what works" (p. 25).

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The middle word in PLC is also, I think, the most central to understanding PLCs and the one that, if activated, prevents PLCs from descending into disappointment. Failed PLCs provide just one more reason educational cynics look upon educational innovation with "This too shall pass" or "Been there, done that" or "Didn't work then, won't work now."

Learning is a matter, first, of consciousness. It requires paying attention. It requires deciding what to notice. It demands a pace slow enough for people to reflect and process with others what is happening. Learning occurs when people ask, "What are we learning from this?" "Why is this learning important to us? Why does it matter?" "What are we going to do about what we are learning?"

The Other Two Words in PLC. The words *professional* and *community* in *PLC* deserve some attention. President Bill Clinton stated in 1998, "Teaching is the essential profession, the one that makes all other professions possible" (p. 1). One of the aspects of a profession is that it has a knowledge base and ways to act upon and expand that knowledge base. Doctors have a knowledge base, which they act upon when they diagnose and prescribe. Lawyers have a knowledge base, which they act upon when they file briefs. CPAs have a hefty knowledge base in terms of tax codes.

Educators have a knowledge base, too. For, example, the 1998 publication by the American Psychological Association, *How Students Learn: Reforming Schools Through Learner-Centered Education* (edited by Nadine M. Lambert and Barbara L. McCombs) is a compendium of what is known about how young people learn and how educators can help them learn. A similar resource is *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School*, published in 2000 by the National Research Council.

Doctors expand their knowledge base through professional learning (associations, conferences, journals) and practices (internships and rounds). Lawyers network with others in groups with strings of names that usually challenge their receptionists, research precedent, and study cases. CPAs keep current with tax classes each year.

Unfortunately, educators do not regularly act upon nor expand their knowledge base in education as much as other professionals do. In "A Knowledge Base for the Teaching Profession: What Would It Look Like and How Can We Get One?" James Hiebert, Ronald Gallimore, and James W. Stigleruch (2002) bemoan the chasm between research and practice. In terms of expanding the knowledge base, they see a new role for professional development that is "long-term, school-based, collaborative, focused on students' learning, and linked to curricula" (p. 3). They are not talking about traditional professional development, however, sometimes known as "sit 'n' git," "drive-by," "sage-on-the-stage" or "seagull style" (the seagull flies in, drops a load, and moves on). They are talking about professional learning.

Characteristics of Professional Learning. In *Powerful Designs for Professional Learning* (2008a, pp. 3–4), I described 12 qualities of powerful professional learning, characteristics that distinguish it from professional development:

1. **Powerful professional learning arises from and returns benefits to the real world of teaching and learning**. This is more important than it sounds. Often the superintendent or principal who wants to start the school year off right hires a speaker. Sometimes a committee chooses the person. But usually staff are clear that not much change is expected as a result of the speech. It may also be clear that the speaker knows very little about the school or district or their

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needs and may be giving a generic speech, perhaps one that has gone well in other venues. After such speakers have bowed to the applause, folded up their notes and disengaged their technology, nothing much does change in the real world of teaching and learning—unless the school engages in professional learning activities related to what they have heard.

2. **Powerful professional learning requires the collection, analysis and presentation of real data**—from student work and teacher practice. Test scores matter but so do other representations of achievement, demographics, perceptions, and programs and practices that operate in the school. All these, according to Victoria Bernhardt (2008) are important to collect . . . before, during, and after professional learning experiences. Before, they help educators decide for themselves what they need to learn. During, they help educators monitor changes happening in classrooms and schools, adjusting as necessary. After, they provide evidence of improvement and suggest next steps.
3. **Powerful professional learning begins with what will really help young people learn**, engages those involved in helping them learn, and has an effect on the classrooms (and schools, districts, even states) where those students and their teachers learn. Educators who engage in powerful professional learning first work to understand how a school or district can improve learning for all children, using data as well as their own skills, knowledge, and experiences.
4. **Powerful professional learning results in application in the classroom**. Throughout the professional learning experience (which may be continuous), the focus remains on what is happening with learners (both student and adult) in the classroom, school, and district. During their learning, educators return to the learning environment to do the following:

   - Try out a new technique with learners;
   - Set up a research process to obtain data;
   - Receive feedback from students and coaches and mentors;
   - Reflect on what they are learning;
   - Confer with others about what is being learned;
   - Report results; and
   - Modify what they are doing and repeat these processes.

   They may also plan next steps.
5. **Powerful professional learning experiences may not formally *end***; they may simply evolve into other powerful forms as participants raise more questions or want to try another strategy. Powerful professional learning usually leads to the desire to make continued improvement. It may even change an institution into a learning community.
6. **Powerful professional learning honors the professionalism, expertise, experiences, and skills of staff**. When administrators rely on outsiders, they may communicate the message that those within a school or district lack expertise. Although this can sometimes be the case, with powerful professional learning experiences school and district staff can develop their own expertise. During the process, educators identify content needs that fit the

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context of their environment and select powerful professional learning strategies that will help them learn; they also identify the people who can lead the learning, people who might very well be in the school or district itself.

A culture becomes a continuous learning community when educators are asked to apply their skills and professionalism to improve student learning—and when they recognize the skills and professionalism everyone else brings to the improvement process.

7. **Powerful professional learning is content-rich** because the content is the school or district itself . . . its staff . . . its learners. This is content that matters to the people engaged in the experience.
8. **Powerful professional learning is collaborative or has collaborative aspects to it**. Educators learn from each other, enriching their own professional lives and the culture of the school or district. They build a shared vision of a school or district, and—contrasting that with realities—they work on what matters and help each other make changes. They set goals, help each other meet these goals and hold themselves and other accountable.
9. **Powerful professional learning establishes a culture of quality**. Powerful professional learning encourages discussion about what quality looks like, in terms of the work educators and their students do.
10. **Powerful professional learning results in "buy-in" because it utilizes the talent within**. Those who are going to implement change will be more likely to do so if they are involved in the design of the change through powerful professional learning. An aphorism speaks to this phenomenon: *Them's as does the doin' does the decidin'*.
11. **Powerful professional learning slows the pace of schooling**, providing time for the inquiry and reflection that promote learning and application. Educators seldom pause in their hectic schedules to make sense of what is going on. They just keep going. Powerful professional learning is a gift to educators who seldom have a chance to reflect on their own teaching and learning.
12. **Powerful professional learning designs provide the activities that make professional learning communities (PLCs) more than just a structure**. Without meaningful learning activities that occur during PLC time, PLCs may go the way of so many other structures, such as block scheduling and small schools, that were instituted without enough attention to what teachers and students do that would take advantage of those structures.

This book is about growing professional learning communities and, therefore, becoming more professional.

Community. Many groups call themselves communities, whether they are one or not. *Community*, in the strictest sense, means people with something in common—which may be no more than the fact that they belong to the same group!

Names for other groups help us discern the differences. For example, an organization is not necessarily a community. Both may have common purposes, but the main difference may lie with who sets the common purpose. In an organization (or, as a

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type of organization, a business), which is often structured as a hierarchy, the bosses (or a board or trustees) set the purpose. In fact, the purpose usually comes first in an organization ("We are organizing to save the whales"; "Our business is fixing computers"). The hierarchy dictates that others join the organization or are employed by the business in order to achieve that purpose. In an effort to achieve conviviality, the bosses may declare that the organization is a community, but the inequality that is necessary for a business may lurk just under the surface of *bonhomie*.

A community is more likely to determine its purpose together, with each member of the community wielding as much power as another. In fact, the "first order of business" in a community might be to determine purpose. Wheatley calls this process one of finding identity. "Who are we? What do we want to work on?"

Associations seem to be "organization lite"; that is, they are more loosely connected than organizations. Clubs and societies seem more oriented toward the social aspects of being together—that is, we are together because we share interests (think golf), enjoy being together and may have no other purpose. Unions and alliances suggest politically oriented organizations with an agenda of protection or change.

One type of group—a guild—comes close to community for me. In a guild, people engaged in the same work share their knowledge and understanding. A guild usually features apprentices, who are new to the work, and masters, who are experienced. In a typical guild, the masters share with apprentices what they have learned. In a community, the sharing is not one-way—from master to apprentice. It is two-way, multiple ways, universal. Also, in community, learning is not static, a thing to be passed on from generation to generation. It is renewable, as members of community contribute to its regeneration each time they learn and share learning. In fact, putting the word *learning* with *community* is what matters. A community is a type of organization that helps humans make meaning, connect, learn, and grow.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

This book is more description than prescription. As you read it, you will follow the story of a school, Glen Haven Middle School, from its first steps toward becoming a PLC through its first year of engagement in the process. You might think of this description as an extended case study. You will not find any prescriptive rules or steps. You will, however, find commentary about what is happening at Glen Haven at various points during the year, ideas that you might consider in your own environment. You will also find tools to use to explore those ideas. These are for download at **go.hbe.com.au**.

The story of Glen Haven gives rise to the commentary, not vice-versa. Glen Haven does not serve as an afterthought example to the ideas. The ideas arise from the story. What the faculty and staff encounter along the way to becoming a PLC leads to discussion.

Thus, the content of the book emerges from the joining together of people at Glen Haven Middle School. As Wheatley says, "Emergence is the surprising capacity we discover only when we join together" (p. 67). "We can never predict what will emerge" (p. 66). You may chafe at what happens at Glen Haven—it isn't what you would have done. You may rail, "Why did they do that?" or, more likely, "Why *didn't* they do that?" For example, the Glen Haven Middle School PLC decides to focus on writing. The data show they should have been more concerned about learning in

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