



THIRD EDITION

# Learning by Doing

A Handbook for Professional  
Learning Communities at Work™

**Richard DuFour**  
**Rebecca DuFour**  
**Robert Eaker**  
**Thomas W. Many**  
**Mike Mattos**



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# Introduction to the Third Edition

The first edition of this book began with a simple sentence: “We learn best by doing.” This axiom certainly applies to our own work. Since the publication of the first edition of *Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work™* in 2006, we have made presentations to more than one hundred thousand educators, served on dozens of panels, worked with several districts on a long-term basis to assist with their implementation of the Professional Learning Communities at Work (PLC) process, and participated in ongoing dialogue with educators on AllThingsPLC ([www.allthingsplc.info](http://www.allthingsplc.info)). This continuing work with teachers, principals, and central office staff from schools and districts throughout North America and beyond has given us a deeper understanding of the challenges they face as they attempt to implement the PLC process in their organizations.

*We learn best  
by doing.*

In 2010, we shared our deeper understanding in the second edition of *Learning by Doing*. That edition addressed such key concepts as reciprocal accountability, districtwide implementation of the PLC process, the dangerous detours and seductive shortcuts that undermine effective implementation, and a detailed five-point continuum of each element of the PLC process to help educators assess their progress on the PLC journey.

## What’s New in This Edition

We remain proud of the second edition of *Learning by Doing*, but since it was published, we have learned a lot, individually and collectively, and we have written extensively about the PLC process. As we reflected on our learning, we soon recognized several areas of the second edition that needed updating and a few significant issues that we had not adequately addressed. In this third edition, we address those issues and expand on others. New additions and expanded topics to this revised edition include the following.

- **We have added two new chapters:** One new chapter focuses on the importance of team-developed common formative assessments. In our work with schools and educators, we have come to recognize that developing assessments is a fork in the road for many schools on their PLC journey. The path that educators take determines in large part whether their schools will become high-performing PLCs or settle for “PLC lite.” The new material on

creating common formative assessments in this edition will help you travel the right path.

We have also added a chapter on staffing issues in PLCs. We have heard educators express their frustration with the disruption of the collaborative team process that occurs when colleagues leave the team and they must bring new members on board. In this edition, we address keys to hiring staff members who will be a good fit for the PLC process, how to provide effective orientation for them, and how to do a better job of retaining educators.

- **We include more information about successful implementation and common mistakes:** We now have a deeper understanding both of how to implement the PLC process successfully districtwide and the common mistakes districts make when implementation has little impact on student achievement. In this edition, we compare and contrast the strategies that high-impact and low-impact districts use.
- **We address proficiency:** We have come to recognize that clarifying essential standards demands developing an agreed-on understanding of what proficient work looks like. Too often we have seen teams leave the issue of proficiency unaddressed. We provide examples of the kind of clarity regarding proficiency that is a prerequisite to a guaranteed and viable curriculum.
- **We offer suggestions for integrating deeper knowledge into the curriculum and teacher-made assessments:** The Common Core State Standards Initiative has called attention to the fact that state assessments have typically relied on low-level questions that primarily focus on recall of information rather than probing for deeper knowledge. Whether or not a state adopts the Common Core, educators must focus on requiring deeper learning on the part of their students and on creating assessments that will allow students to demonstrate that deeper knowledge.
- **We comprehensively address the issue of systematic intervention:** We are thrilled that Mike Mattos, one of the leading experts on intervention, has become an integral part of our team. Although we addressed the issue of systematic intervention in previous editions, Mike addresses the issue of systematic intervention more fully in this edition.
- **We provide even more tools for your work:** It has become evident to us that educators benefit from having explicit protocols and tools to guide their work as they move through the various steps on the PLC journey. Throughout this edition, we include proven protocols, tools, and sample products from high-performing PLCs and districts.
- **We provide a broader research base:** In this edition, we have updated the research base that supports the PLC process with more than one hundred new references.
- **We focus on immediate steps:** In previous editions, we attempted to present a compelling rationale for why schools should operate as PLCs. The

PLC process has become so widely accepted as the best strategy for improving schools that in this edition, we place a much greater emphasis on taking immediate steps to begin implementation of the process itself.

## A Move From Interest to Commitment

It has been gratifying to witness the growing interest in the PLC at Work process since Rick and Bob published their groundbreaking book on PLCs in 1998, *Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement*. It has been frustrating, however, that more educators have not moved from interest to commitment. As Art Turock, the author of several books on self-motivation, observes, “There is a difference between interest and commitment. When you are interested in something, you do it only when it is convenient. When you are committed to something, you accept no excuses, only results” (A. Turock, personal communication, September 30, 2015).

Our colleagues Ken Williams and Tom Hierck (2015) frame the issue another way. To paraphrase their approach, they observe that many educators are “flirting” with PLCs, observing the process from afar but not taking positive steps to move forward. Other educators are “dating” PLCs. They are dabbling in the work and curious about its potential, but they leave their options open so that they can break up when the next hot thing comes along. Still other educators are “engaged” to the PLC process because they have made a commitment to engage fully in the work and are striving to get better at it. As Williams and Hierck (2015) put it, these educators have “put a ring on it” (p. 96). Finally, we would extend their analogy to say that some educators are “married” to the PLC process. This is the way of life they have chosen, and they would never return to their old way of doing things. Their schools continue to flourish even if key leaders leave because the PLC process is so deeply embedded in the culture of their school it has become “the way we do things around here.”

It is time for educators to move from an interest in the PLC process to a commitment to the process where there are no excuses for failing to move forward. It is time to progress from flirting with PLCs to marrying the process. It is time to move from thinking about PLCs and talking about PLCs to *doing* what PLCs actually do and getting better at it. The moral imperative for engaging fully in this process has never been stronger, and we do not apologize for presenting this book as what it is intended to be: a demand for action from educators at all levels.

The first edition supported schools and teams engaged in the PLC process by providing helpful tools and templates in two formats—within the pages of the book and on a compact disc that was included with the book. In the second edition, we moved many of the tools and templates online so that we could revise, update, and add to them on an ongoing basis. This edition features the most up-to-date online resources along with some new tools and templates. Please visit **go.SolutionTree.com/PLCbooks** to download the free reproducibles and access materials related to this book. We also invite educators to visit AllThingsPLC ([www.allthingsplc.info](http://www.allthingsplc.info)) to access research, case studies, strategies, and tools and to share materials they have created to help them in their work.

*It is time for educators to move from an interest in the PLC process to a commitment to the process where there are no excuses for failing to move forward.*



## Part Five

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# Tips for Moving Forward: Creating Systematic Interventions and Extensions to Ensure Students Receive Additional Time and Support for Learning

**1**

**Start with PLC critical questions one and two:** Most schools don't have a scheduling problem; they have a targeting problem. This reality is captured best when we hear educators say, "We would like to revise our schedule and provide students additional time to learn, but we can't because we have too much to cover." This claim demonstrates that the school still embraces a mission of teaching, not learning. The goal of a learning-focused school is not to cover curriculum, but to ensure students actually learn the skills, content, and behaviors that are critical to their future success. The four critical questions of the PLC process not only focus the collaboration of a team, but they also provide a logical sequence to the work. When teams skip the first two questions ("Learn what?" and "How will we know?"), then responding effectively when students don't learn is impossible.

**2**

**Beware of appeals to mindless precedent:** Appeals to mindless precedent include the phrases, "But we have always done it this way," "We have never done it that way," and the ever-popular, "The schedule won't let us." These appeals pose a formidable barrier to the creation of a PLC.

We have carefully perused both the Old and New Testaments and can find no evidence that any school schedule was carved into stone tablets and brought down from Mount Sinai. Yet in schools throughout North America, the schedule is regarded as an unalterable, sacrosanct part of the school not to be tampered with in any way. The reverence afforded the schedule is puzzling. Mere mortals created it, and educators should regard it as a tool to further priorities rather than as an impediment to change.

An advocate for a schedule that provides additional time and support for student learning might present the following argument.

- We contend that our fundamental purpose and most vital priority is to ensure all students learn at high levels.
- Research, as well as our own experience and intuition, make it clear that it is impossible for all students to learn at high levels if some do not receive additional time and support for learning.

Even the most ardent advocates of the premise that all students can learn acknowledge that they will not learn at the same rate and with the same support.

- If the only time we offer this service is before or after school, some of our students cannot or will not utilize the services. It will be difficult for us to require those students to do what is necessary to be successful if our only access to them is beyond the school day.
- Therefore, the priority in designing our schedule should be ensuring we have access to students for intervention during the school day in ways that do not deprive them of new direct instruction in their classroom.

### 3

**Acknowledge that traditional special education is not the answer:** For most of the past half-century, the only systematic intervention process that was mandated for every school to provide was special education. Objective analysis of the results would conclude that special education has not only failed to close student achievement gaps, but has actually been detrimental to achieving this outcome. The graduation rate for special needs students was 61 percent in 2014—almost 20 percent lower than for regular education students (Diament, 2014). Minority and economically disadvantaged students are much more likely to be identified as special needs. African American students make up only 16 percent of the student population, but occupy as many as 32 percent of the seats in some special education programs. Those numbers are similar for Latino students (Westat, 2006). Special needs students are also under-represented in postsecondary education (Samuels, 2010), but over-represented in prison. It is estimated that at least one-third and up to 70 percent of those incarcerated have received special education services in school (Mader & Butrymowicz, 2014). Based on these results, it would be hard to justify perpetuating traditional special education services for our youth most at risk.

We are not suggesting that special education services should be discontinued altogether, or that educators should disregard student IEPs. What we are suggesting is that federal law now advocates for providing schools much more flexibility to meet all students' needs. But taking advantage of this power requires schools to rethink the way regular and special education have worked for years.

### 4

**Focus on what you can control:** We find many schools, when planning interventions for struggling students, spend an inordinate amount of time identifying and discussing factors that they cannot directly change. These topics include a student's home environment, a lack of district support, the pressure of preparing students for high-stakes state assessments, and ill-conceived state and federal educational policies. While these concerns are real, and might be impacting both the student and the site educators,