

Introduction

Remodelling Your School: The Unexpected Obstacles

Have you ever experienced a major home remodelling project or known someone who has? We don't mean something minor, like repainting a bedroom or installing new kitchen countertops. We mean demolition, redesigning and rebuilding; you can't recognise it when you're done; you could have been on a home-improvement television show with this kind of remodelling. If you have ever taken on such a project – and lived to tell the tale – then you probably gained a greater understanding of the well-known line from Robert Burns's poetry, "The best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry."

It seems no amount of planning can totally prepare you for a job of this magnitude. Before starting the project, you can do everything within your power to prepare; you can visit model homes for ideas, read books on remodelling, select an experienced architect to create detailed plans, receive council approval for the blueprints and hire a highly recommended general contractor to carry out the work. Without question, this groundwork is vital. Yet, despite all your planning, once you actually start the work, you will face unforeseen questions and obstacles. Some problems will be easy to fix, and others could stop construction in its tracks. When embarking on any project of this scope, it would be naïve to think that everything will run smoothly from start to finish. In the end, navigating the unforeseen obstacles is the key to ultimate success.

Becoming a professional learning community (PLC) is no different. Before beginning your school's PLC journey, you can read books on the topic, attend conferences, visit model schools and hire experienced consultants to provide professional development; you can do everything within your power to plan for success. While such careful preparation is necessary prior to asking educators to commit to the PLC process, this groundwork alone will not be enough. PLC practices do not represent minor tweaks to our traditional school system; they involve demolition, redesigning and rebuilding, and you can't recognise it when you're done. If there was a home-improvement television show for education, transformation into a PLC would be a featured makeover. Questions will arise and hurdles will emerge once you actually start doing the work. Some questions will be minor, like how often collaborative teacher teams should give common formative assessments. Other obstacles can bring the entire process to

a screeching halt, such as how we will create time for frequent collaboration. How you address the unexpected will ultimately determine if your efforts to become a PLC will be a successful remodelling or a disastrous re-muddling.

A Sequential, Nonlinear and Cyclical Process

Remodelling a house is a very sequential and linear process. When building an addition, for example, the foundation must be poured before framing can begin. Framing the walls precedes installing the windows. Each step is clearly defined and follows a logical construction process. But becoming a PLC is different; it is a sequential process, but it is also cyclical and nonlinear. (We know – being both sequential and nonlinear sounds like an oxymoron.) You see, there are practices in the PLC process that do have a logical, step-by-step design. For example, take the four critical questions that guide the work of teacher teams.

1. What do we want students to know and be able to do?
2. How will we know when they have learned it?
3. What will we do when they haven't learned it?
4. What will we do to extend the learning when they already know it?

Teacher teams must address these questions sequentially. It would be difficult for a teacher team to create a common assessment to determine if students are learning if the team skipped the first critical question and did not identify what they expect their students to learn in the first place. Likewise, it would be difficult to respond when students don't learn if there was no assessment process designed to measure student progress.

Yet, due to unforeseen bumps in the road – the obstacles you encounter once you begin actually doing the work of becoming a PLC – you will most assuredly have to backtrack sometimes before you can move forward. Continuing with our example, it is not uncommon for teacher teams to initially answer critical question one by identifying a list of essential standards from the required state curriculum. When the team then turns to the second critical question, members will likely find it difficult to create a common assessment if they have not unpacked the standard to ensure team members have defined the standard the same way, agreed on the rigour level students must reach to demonstrate proficiency, and settled on the scope and sequence of when each standard will be taught. Seeing that they can't answer the second critical question without this additional information, the team members would need to go back to the first question before creating their common assessment. The process is sequential in design yet nonlinear in actual implementation.

Using the same example, we can see how the PLC process is also cyclical. A collaborative teacher team will likely apply the four critical questions when planning for their first unit of the school year. The team will:

- clarify the essential skills and concepts embedded in the unit
- design a common formative assessment to administer at the end of the unit
- teach the unit within the agreed-on window of time, according to the team's common pacing guide
- give the common assessment
- collectively review the results to reflect on their individual and collective teaching and identify students who need additional time and support to learn the essential curriculum
- provide interventions and extension.

When it is done, what will the team do next? They repeat the process for the next unit of study. But in the next unit, the team will have learned the importance of unpacking standards when answering the first critical question, so backtracking will be less likely. This is what the PLC process is designed to do: create continuous, job-embedded adult learning to improve student achievement. You learn most often when you encounter obstacles and then find better ways to overcome and move forward. But if a team gets stuck and can't overcome the unexpected, the process gets bogged down, and learning stops.

■ Your Guide on the Side

The purpose of this book is to be your “guide on the side” when you have specific questions or encounter obstacles on your journey to becoming a PLC. There is an old Chinese proverb that advises, “To know the road ahead, ask those coming back.” The essential elements of the PLC process are firmly grounded in powerful research, but we have honed and refined the process through our work as school educators. We refer to our process as PLC at Work because we are not theorists; we are practitioners. Before writing their first book on PLCs, Rick DuFour and Bob Eaker worked together for more than twenty years. Along with the dedicated staff at Adlai E. Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, Illinois, they learned about the most proven practices to increase student learning, started applying them, faced obstacles, tried again and found solutions. Tom Many's district, Kildeer Countryside Community Consolidated School District 96, fed into Stevenson, and he joined Rick and Bob on the journey. Becky DuFour and Mike Mattos learned from Rick and Bob about the PLC process, began the journey at their own primary and middle schools, hit bumps along the way and ultimately worked with their staff members to overcome the obstacles and

succeed. Since the mid-1990s, we have helped thousands of educators across the globe successfully remodel their schools into PLCs. During the panel discussions at PLC at Work Institutes, we have been asked hundreds of questions about the process we have and assisted educators in exploring and resolving those questions.

These experiences allow us to anticipate the questions you will have along the way, identify the likely obstacles you will face, and provide the answers and advice you need to move forward.

How This Book Is Organised

Concise Answers to Frequently Asked Questions About Professional Learning Communities at Work, Revised Edition is designed as a companion to *Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work, Revised Third Edition* (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, Many & Mattos, 2017). *Learning by Doing* is a detailed road map for exactly how to become a PLC. It digs deeply into each essential element of the PLC process, cites comprehensive research supporting every practice, outlines specific implementation steps, offers relevant case studies, and provides sample products and targeted rubrics to assess your progress. Without question, it is a must-have resource for any organisation committed to becoming a PLC.

Concise Answers to Frequently Asked Questions is your simplified, quick-reference guide on the side to PLCs. Our goals with this book are to provide:

- **Succinct answers to frequently asked questions** – Think about a time when you bought a new electronic device for your home, like a flat-screen television. The device probably came with two sets of directions – one set a comprehensive review of the entire product, explaining every relevant detail and feature, and the other set a more concise, quick-reference guide. The latter is not designed to answer every question in complete detail, but instead to provide brief answers to very specific, timely questions. Both have similar content but are designed to assist the user in different ways. *Learning by Doing, Revised Third Edition*, is the comprehensive manual. It is designed to provide in-depth research and information on every aspect of the PLC process. *Concise Answers to Frequently Asked Questions* is your quick-reference guide. In it, we have identified the most frequently asked questions and common obstacles that schools face when becoming a PLC and then provided concise, targeted answers.
- **Quick access** – This book is designed so the reader can easily navigate to a specific answer without having to read an entire chapter for the information. The detailed table of contents contains both the larger chapter topics and the specific questions addressed in each area. If a teacher team

is working on the first critical question, for example, and wants to know how many essential standards they should identify, they can quickly turn to chapter 3 (titled “What Do We Want Our Students to Learn?”) and look up the question, “How many essential standards should teacher teams select?” The team does not have to read the entire chapter, only the answer to their specific question.

- **Simple language** – *Learning by Doing, Revised Third Edition*, is written in a very clear and understandable style. But because one of the book’s goals is to provide comprehensive evidence supporting each PLC practice, it cites a significant amount of research, which includes some academic language. *Concise Answers to Frequently Asked Questions* assumes readers do not need to be convinced to become a PLC. Subsequently, we give less attention to citing research, allowing us to purposefully write straight-to-the-point answers using candid, common-sense language.

We envision schools relying on both resources, *Learning by Doing, Revised Third Edition*, and *Concise Answers to Frequently Asked Questions*, throughout their PLC journey. The former is an excellent resource at the beginning to build understanding and clarity on the overall process and as a tool to use on an ongoing basis when a deeper review of each element of the PLC process is necessary. *Concise Answers to Frequently Asked Questions* is a timely reference resource to use when specific questions and unexpected obstacles arise.

PLCs 101

While many readers of this book might already have prior knowledge of the basic elements of the PLC process, we expect that some readers are learning about the model for the first time. To use this book most effectively, you should understand some fundamental PLC vocabulary.

What is a PLC?

The official definition of a professional learning community is “an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve” (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Many, 2010, p. 11). More simply stated, the PLC process is a never-ending process in which educators commit to working together to ensure higher levels of learning for every student. They achieve this outcome by learning together about the best practices proven to increase student learning, applying what they have learned

and using evidence of student learning to make decisions and revisions in practice to help even more students learn at higher levels.

What is the PLC – the entire network, the school or the individual teams within the school?

The larger organisation is the PLC. So if a network has committed to the PLC process, then the network is considered a PLC. If a single school within a network has committed to the PLC process, then the school is considered the PLC. Within each PLC, teachers form collaborative teams to best achieve the mission of ensuring high levels of learning for all. While collaborative teacher teams are part of the larger PLC, we do not refer to each teacher team as a PLC.

What is collective inquiry?

Collective inquiry means learning together. In a PLC, we do not make decisions by averaging opinions, guessing or defaulting to “This is how we have always done it.” We are professional educators. The very definition of a profession is a job that requires specialised education, training or skill and that includes the use of accepted best practices. Members of a profession are expected to know and apply these practices on behalf of their clients – in this case, students. Because education research continues to grow and evolve, educators within a school must learn continuously to achieve higher levels of learning for students.

What is action research?

Research alone cannot improve student learning; you must turn research into action. Action research means we apply what we have learned. We try it out, in our own school or network and with our own students. In a PLC, we are willing to try new practices and procedures and then measure their impact on student learning to determine if the change was beneficial.

What are the three big ideas?

Becoming a PLC is a process; it is not a program to simply put in place. Three guiding principles, the *three big ideas*, steer the process. They are:

1. a focus on learning
2. a collaborative culture
3. a results orientation.

The more a school or network can align its practices and procedures to these ideas, the higher the probability that it functions as a PLC, and, more important, the more its students will learn.

What is a focus on learning?

A focus on learning is a PLC's commitment to making student learning the fundamental purpose of the school or network. This means that you assess every policy, practice and procedure with these questions: Will doing this lead to higher levels of learning for our students? Are we willing to revise or discontinue actions that fail to increase student learning?

What is a collaborative culture?

Because no single educator has all the time, skills and knowledge to ensure all students learn at high levels, educators in a PLC school or network commit to working collaboratively to achieve this outcome. Working collaboratively is neither optional nor invitational; every member of the organisation is expected to work as part of a collaborative team. Equally important, the organisation dedicates the time and resources necessary to make collaboration job embedded.

What is a results orientation?

It is commonly said that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. In a PLC, we acknowledge that acting on our good intentions to help students is not enough; we must know if our actions actually lead to higher levels of learning. A PLC purposefully seeks timely, relevant information – evidence of student learning – that confirms which practices are increasing student learning and which actions are not.

What is a culture that is simultaneously loose and tight?

A culture that is simultaneously loose and tight is one that empowers people to make important decisions and encourages them to be creative and innovative (loose), while at the same time, demands that certain aspects of the culture are non-discretionary and required (tight).

In a PLC, the tight aspects include the following.

- Educators work collaboratively rather than in isolation and have clarified the commitments they make to each other about how they will work together.

- The fundamental structure of the school becomes the collaborative team in which members work interdependently to achieve common goals for which all members are mutually accountable.
- The team establishes a guaranteed curriculum, unit by unit, so all students have access to the same knowledge and skills regardless of which teacher they are assigned.
- The team develops common formative assessments to frequently gather evidence of student learning.
- The school has created systems of intervention to ensure students who struggle receive additional time and support for learning in a way that is timely, directive, diagnostic and systematic.
- The team uses evidence of student learning to inform and improve the individual and collective practice of the team members.

The loose aspects of the culture include empowering teams to establish their own goals, collective commitments, guaranteed and viable curriculum, pacing, instructional practices, common assessments and school-wide system of interventions. In other words, educators are given the authority to make very important decisions in a PLC, but, in return, they must be willing to accept responsibility for the outcomes of those decisions and committed to improving the results they are experiencing.

The PLC process requires a culture that is simultaneously loose and tight on the right work.

We have had meetings at our school for years, so are we a PLC?

Being a PLC is more than just meeting together as a staff, with year-level colleagues, and in departments. In a PLC, collaboration requires taking collective responsibility for student learning and working interdependently to achieve this outcome. To guide this process, the collaboration centres on four critical questions.

1. What do we want students our students to learn?
 - What knowledge, skills and dispositions should every student acquire as a result of this unit, this course or this year level?
2. How will we know our students are learning?
 - How will we know when students have acquired the essential knowledge and skills?
 - What evidence will we gather to ensure students understand the knowledge and skills we are teaching?

3. How will we respond when some students do not learn?
4. How will we extend the learning for students who are already proficient?
 - How will we respond when many of our students have already demonstrated proficiency in the knowledge and skills under consideration?

Why are the three big ideas so important to the PLC process?

We cannot overemphasise the importance of the three big ideas to the PLC process. When educators truly embrace and act on these ideas, the answers to many of the inevitable questions that arise in PLC transformation become evident. Imagine a school in which the educators have built consensus on the following assertions.

“We recognise that the fundamental purpose of our school and the reason we come to work each day is to ensure all students learn at high levels. We understand that helping all students learn requires a collective, collaborative effort rather than a series of isolated efforts. Therefore, we work in teams and constantly gather evidence of student learning for two purposes: to inform and improve our individual and collective practice and to better meet the needs of individual students through intervention or extension.”

Without this shared understanding of basic assumptions, every question that arises in a school can become a matter for debate based on individual opinions and personal war stories. When others accept these assumptions, they serve as filters that guide the decision-making process in a PLC. So recognise that while this book offers responses to discrete questions, it is also intended to help you answer virtually any question by giving you insight into how members of a PLC think.

■ A Word of Caution

It is important that you use this book correctly: as a powerful reference guide to help you along during your PLC journey. Becoming a PLC requires a deep understanding of the essential elements of the PLC process. Additionally, as a PLC identifies areas of need – such as better assessment practices that are proven to increase student motivation and achievement – it digs deeply to identify best next steps. This book is not intended to be a cheat sheet for the PLC process, providing short cuts to the right answers. Those who use this book wisely will gain timely insight and clarity on specific steps on the PLC journey from educators who have travelled the same path, as in the old proverb. Those who do not will learn a valuable lesson: there are no short cuts on the journey to becoming a PLC. This book is designed to quicken your pace, not to help you skip steps.