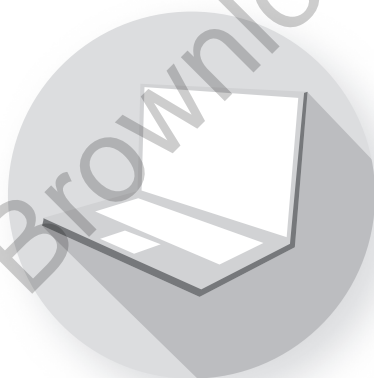


Solutions for Professional Learning Communities

How to Use Digital Tools to Support Teachers in a PLC



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Introduction

Ask anyone who has spent the better part of his or her career as an educator, and that person will tell you that teaching in today's classrooms can feel like an almost impossible challenge. Our schools have become increasingly diverse—socially, economically, *and* academically. Students who are struggling with poverty, struggling to learn new languages, and struggling to believe in the intentions of communities that have all too often left them disaffected and disengaged sit alongside students who have mastered essential content before the academic year even begins. Complicating matters is the fact that society *expects more* from graduates than ever before. Gone are the days when memorizing individual facts and figures was enough for students to earn diplomas. Instead, new sets of standards detailed by both public and private organizations—national and provincial governments, state legislatures, councils of political leaders, organizations that represent the interests of leaders in science, business, and industry—demand that every student leaves our schools ready to evaluate, persuade, influence, analyze, and synthesize at the highest levels (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010; NGSS Lead States, 2013; Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2009).

Our students are also changing. Having grown up in a fast-paced world where technology makes constant participation possible, they see traditional schools as irrelevant. Engagement drops year after year as students realize that the independent, self-selected, passion-based learning they do beyond schools bears little resemblance to the

teacher-directed, presentation-heavy, one-size-fits-all learning that continues to define our buildings (Busteed, 2013). Preparing dozens of dissatisfied students with unique sets of strengths and weaknesses to succeed in tomorrow's world can overwhelm anyone working alone. "The only thing worse than being bored," educational change expert Michael Fullan (2013) writes in *Stratosphere*, "is being responsible for teaching the bored under conditions that restrict what you can do" (p. 17).

That's where the power and promise of professional learning communities (PLCs) come in. The simple truth is that teachers no longer *have* to work alone. Collaborating to collectively define the knowledge and skills that are essential for students to master and then working together to identify and amplify high-leverage instructional practices empowers everyone. Teachers who have figured out the keys to student engagement can share strategies with peers who are struggling in disconnected classrooms. Teachers who are skilled at integrating higher-order thinking skills into daily lessons can lift peers who are struggling with the transition to classrooms where knowing isn't as important as doing, and teachers with a deep and meaningful understanding of their content areas can lend a hand to colleagues who are struggling to identify the kinds of curricular misconceptions that commonly confuse students.

However, collaboration isn't as easy as it sounds because it requires a measure of coordination between colleagues that teachers in traditional schools aren't used to. Tasks that were once completed in isolation—identifying essential content and skills, developing and delivering assessments, taking action on behalf of students struggling to master the core curriculum or in need of enrichment—become tasks that are completed with partners. Information that teachers once managed themselves—lesson plans, unit-overview sheets, data sets communicating evidence of student progress—becomes information that has to be efficiently communicated to others. Even

the students in our classrooms—who have always been seen as the responsibility of individual teachers—are shared in professional learning communities as teachers work to give every student access to the expertise of the entire team.

While teachers are rarely opposed to the notion of coordinating their work, coordination *does* take additional time, energy, and effort. In organizational theory, time, energy, and effort are called a transaction cost (Shirky, 2008). Every additional planning meeting designed to bring members together, every additional email generated to organize team choices, every additional minute spent looking for shared documents, and every additional moment spent wrestling to come to consensus or to reorganize students to meet their individual needs is a transaction cost—and teachers in professional learning communities will inevitably weigh the perceived benefits of shared tasks against collaboration's mental and physical demands before changing their behaviors. Teachers may believe that collaboration *can* make them stronger, but they won't begin to work together in meaningful ways until they are convinced that the kinds of core tasks that PLCs embrace are *doable*.

The good news is that new digital tools can make coordination in knowledge-driven workspaces easier. Whether that coordination depends on the sharing of ideas, having deeper conversations about important issues, creating shared work products, or taking action around knotty issues, digital tools are fundamentally changing the way we work together. On a large scale, people around the world are organizing themselves in online spaces that are designed to offer just-in-time support to one another. They share ideas and resources using tools like Twitter (www.twitter.com), develop content with one another using tools like Google Drive (<http://drive.google.com>), and meet virtually using tools like Skype (www.skype.com) and Google Hangouts (<http://hangouts.google.com>). Popular social platforms like Facebook and Google+ become homes for interest-specific

communities and online conferences covering topics from health-care and hospice to information security and city management, giving professionals in any field ready access to the hearts and minds of like-minded peers.

Not surprisingly, similar patterns of group behavior exist within schools—most learning teams share ideas and resources with one another to start their collaborative efforts and end by taking action together (Graham & Ferriter, 2008). That means the same digital tools that help professionals reimagine learning spaces and coordinate work *beyond* the schoolhouse can be used to facilitate the collective efforts of groups *within* the schoolhouse, lowering transaction costs and convincing teachers that the kinds of practices required of colleagues in professional learning communities are worth tackling.

In *How to Use Digital Tools to Support Teachers in a PLC*, we will take a closer look at just how that work can be done. Each chapter focuses on one of the three increasingly complex collaborative practices that Clay Shirky (2008) details in his seminal work on the impact that digital tools have on the work of groups, *Here Comes Everybody*: (1) sharing, (2) cooperating, and (3) taking collective action. Readers will build awareness of what sharing, cooperating, and taking collective action look like and then explore digital tools that can help make those practices more approachable for PLC members. There is no one right way to read *How to Use Digital Tools to Support Teachers in a PLC*. Some readers will start at page one and work to the end of the text in order to get a sense of the full range of PLC tasks that digital tools can support. Others will read individual chapters addressing the specific collaborative challenges that they are wrestling with.

To help you decide on a strategy that is right for you, here is an overview of the three chapters.

Chapter 1: Sharing

At any given moment, teachers are stumbling across remarkable resources on the web. Whether it is a collection of lessons published by a public television station in the Bay Area of California, a video on bullying produced by high school students in Philadelphia, or a research report released by a national organization detailing the kinds of schools that students most desire, each individual discovery has the potential to spark conversation, improve practice, and change teaching and learning for the better. The challenge for learning communities is aggregating this information—organizing and then sharing it publicly in a way others can easily find. In chapter 1, you will learn to meet this challenge using popular digital tools.

Chapter 2: Cooperating

While sharing requires little real investment on the part of participants, cooperation depends on willing partners who are ready to align their practices with one another. This kind of cooperation within a PLC depends on the ability to come to consensus around shared decisions. Cooperation also depends on collaborative production: together, we need to create content that we are ready to use in our work with students. Coming to consensus around shared decisions and collaboratively producing content, however, can be time-consuming practices simply because they involve negotiated behavior. You can't work as an individual when you are cooperating. Chapter 2 shows you how to facilitate cooperation using digital tools that foster teamwork.

Chapter 3: Taking Collective Action

Collective action is the most sophisticated collaborative behavior in a PLC because it depends on a willingness of all members to honor the will of the group. "Information sharing produces shared awareness

among the participants and collaborative production relies on shared creation,” explains Shirky (2008), “but collective action creates shared responsibility by tying the user’s identity to the identity of the group” (Kindle location 702). In a PLC, collective action begins by building cohesion—a shared sense of what we believe as a group. Collective action then moves into more sophisticated, learning-centered practices as teachers work together to make sure that all students on a grade level or in an academic department master essential outcomes regardless of who their primary teachers are. Chapter 3 details this process and highlights tools that support it.

Author’s Note

It is important to note that while the print version of *How to Use Digital Tools to Support Teachers in a PLC* includes suggested tools for helping learning teams share, cooperate, and take collective action, you can always visit <http://bit.ly/UDTquickguide> to find a constantly updated list of tools and services to use to support the essential skills this book outlines. My goal for extending the *How to Use Digital Tools to Support Teachers in a PLC* collection to the web is to ensure that the content in the print version of this text remains relevant even as popular tools and services change over time.

It is also important to note that there is nothing revolutionary about the tools *How to Use Digital Tools to Support Teachers in a PLC* introduces. In fact, if you constantly find yourself standing at the cutting edge of educational technology, you may well be disappointed by the fact that the tools and suggestions inside this text are functional instead of fantastic. That’s intentional, however: when choosing digital tools to support *collaborative* practices, your primary goal should be to find services and solutions that are approachable to *everyone*—not just the most tech-savvy members of your learning communities. As you are reading, keep in mind the teachers on your team who struggle with technology and be on the lookout for processes, practices, and products that they can master easily.

Regardless of how you choose to tackle *How to Use Digital Tools to Support Teachers in a PLC*, commit yourself to finding at least one core practice that you can improve together with your colleagues. Whether you develop a new approach to organizing web-based resources that can move your learning team forward, create digital conversations that allow members of your school community to build consensus around shared directions, or find new ways to track progress by student and standard with products that can automate the collection and analysis of assessment results, *take action*.

The students in your classrooms are counting on you.

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