



Simplifying Common Assessment

A GUIDE FOR PROFESSIONAL
LEARNING COMMUNITIES AT WORK™



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INTRODUCTION

Framing the Power of Assessment in Professional Learning Communities

Several years ago, we were both working in school systems and trying to make sense of our work and its relationship to standards-based instruction and accountability. Some schools searched for a silver bullet to help them reach high standards, and every effort seemed to result in random improvements with little focus on meeting the needs of all students. Then, we got lucky. Even though we worked in different states and had different roles, we were both enlightened by a powerful model for our practice that set the tone for the work we would do in our schools: professional learning communities (PLCs). Its architects, Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, and Robert Eaker, described a model of continual improvement that schools could use to ensure high levels of learning. The idea of a PLC is not simply to meet external accountability measures, nor is it a silver-bullet program. It requires a thorough change in school or district culture.

We learned that schools get better results by shifting their focus from teaching to learning and that, when school staff members work in collaborative teams in a cycle of improvement, they clarify what students should really know and do. And we learned that when teams actually monitor those things, their students learn at higher levels. They don't write off students who aren't achieving those targeted skills and concepts but rather take responsibility for supporting struggling students' needs. And as a result, they ensure all students receive what they have a right to: a powerful education that helps them attain essential skills and concepts they need to prepare them for whatever they choose to do in their lives.

Needless to say, we were all for it. Yet simply embracing the PLC model wasn't enough. We needed to put legs on it—to make it operational within our own systems. Working with our respective colleagues and continuing to grow in our own knowledge, we identified ways we could implement the model and support the work. Because it was one of the more challenging aspects to implement, we focused on strategies for common assessment. We learned from our experiences how difficult writing and using team-designed common formative assessments (CFAs) could be, particularly when dealing with standards that were complex or unfamiliar to all members on a team. In fact, we saw some teams practically paralyzed from moving forward with using common formative assessments for fear they might be doing something wrong. We also observed that some schools and districts take unfortunate shortcuts around this work,

like using test bank questions or vendor-produced assessments that weren't necessarily providing teams with meaningful data. Given the frequency of these two observations, we wrote our first book, *Common Formative Assessment: A Toolkit for Professional Learning Communities at Work* (Bailey & Jakicic, 2012), to reflect on what we learned in the process. We intended to provide the protocols and templates that would help collaborative teams design and use common assessments in a very practical way. We designed it to help teams build the confidence to develop assessments that would work more effectively and provide information that would help them increase their students' learning.

Since then, we've had the privilege of working with schools and districts across the United States as they do this important work. We've also worked with experienced teams who've navigated the increased rigor accompanying the Common Core standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices [NGA] & Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2010a, 2010b) and other state standards. These experiences have enriched our thinking about how collaborative teams can do this work; and we've come to understand some ways that teams can be more efficient as well as more effective. This book lays out these ideas and ways that teams can effectively write and use common formative assessments. For those who have read and used our first book, you'll notice that the process remains the same; however, this book highlights how teams can simplify the process, what works, and what teams should avoid. For those new to writing and using common formative assessments, this book takes you all the way through the process.

Overview of the Process

In education, few terms are more emotionally charged than *assessment*. Merely uttering the word can put students, educators, parents, and the general public on high alert, triggering a range of emotions including nervousness, fear, confusion, and frustration. In reality, the word *assessment* is vague—its meaning encompasses a host of possible types and purposes connected to the term. We can interpret *assessment* to mean different things, depending on the context or nature of the experience and our perspective or personal connection to the process and outcomes.

Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker, Thomas Many, and Mike Mattos (2016) lay out one of the core beliefs that guide the work of collaborative teams in their book *Learning by Doing*—that is, that teams learn most when they actually get started on the work and then continually reflect and revise throughout the implementation process. We support this principle and encourage teams to get started with the intentional planning process (the *P* in the PDSA cycle—plan, do, study, act), knowing that they will learn as they go. We encourage you to start with the following four steps.

1. Identify the essential standards for your course or grade level.
2. Unwrap standards into learning targets.
3. Pace those learning targets (from the essential standards as well as the supporting standards) throughout the school year.
4. Develop units of instruction that identify when you will give and use common formative assessments.

Those familiar with the big ideas and foundation of professional learning communities can typically recite the four critical questions that guide the work of PLCs (DuFour et al., 2016).

1. What knowledge, skills, and dispositions should every student acquire as a result of this unit, this course, or this grade level?
2. How will we know when each student has acquired the essential knowledge and skills?
3. How will we respond when some students do not learn?
4. How will we extend the learning for students who are already proficient?

Effective collaborative teams work in a cyclical fashion, continually answering these questions in a PDSA cycle for each unit. By first focusing on question 1, What knowledge, skills, and dispositions should every student acquire as a result of this unit, this course, or this grade level?, teams closely examine the essential standards they will be teaching and determine the subset knowledge and skills—in other words, the *learning targets*—that build toward the accomplishment of that standard. This close examination, called *unwrapping* or *unpacking*, ensures clarity for each member of a collaborative team and increases accuracy in the pacing and design of instruction and assessments. While learning targets are generally derived from standards, some less-complex standards may function as a learning target itself. One of the benefits of unwrapping the standards before this work is that teams can focus on individual learning targets instead of the broader standards. The next question, How will we know when each student has acquired the essential knowledge and skills?, is, in our opinion, the most pivotal question we can answer—one that fuels the power of teams. By addressing this question, teams design and use meaningful assessments, making that critical shift from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning. The team focuses on results, keeping assessment data at the forefront of all decisions related to student learning, including teachers' responses when students don't acquire a certain skill or concept (question 3) or require increased challenge or differentiation (question 4). Figure I.1 provides a visual representation of this PDSA cycle and the work teams accomplish within each phase.

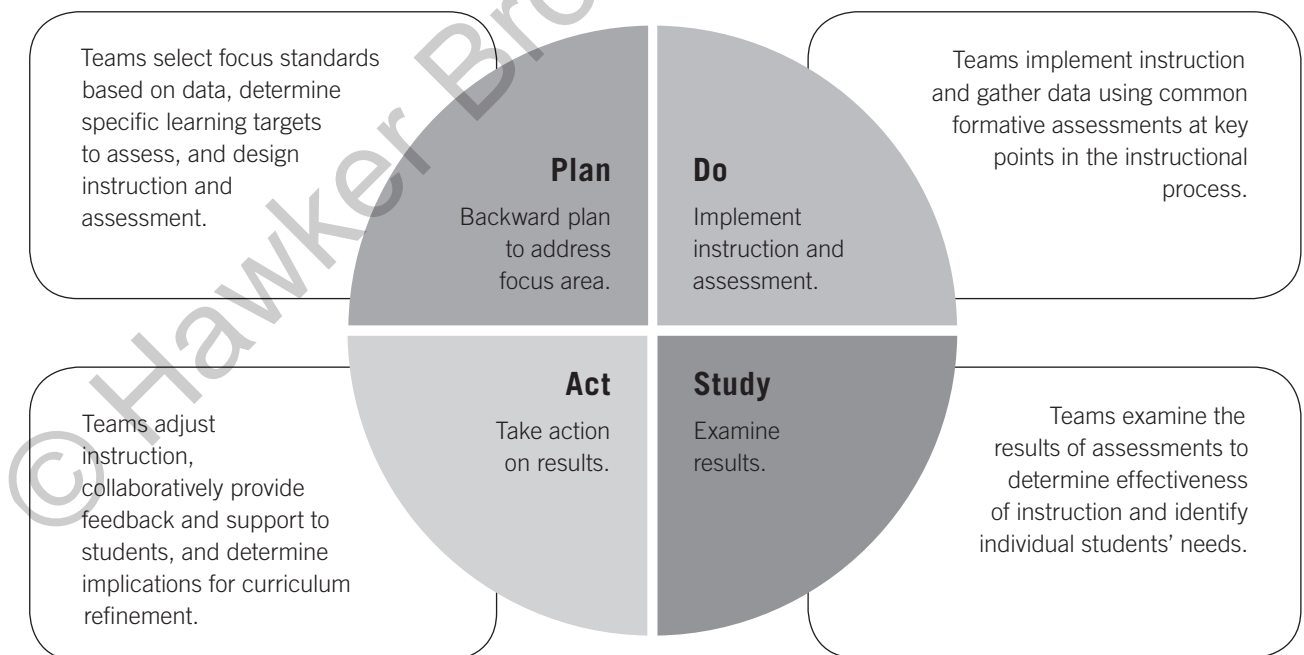


Figure I.1: PDSA cycle.

Getting teams to a point where they are confident working in this cycle takes time and dedication and is not without its challenges, especially with regard to assessment. Recognize that the work will likely not be perfect, but your team will learn a lot about what is important and how to best use information to help students achieve. Throughout the chapters in this book, we provide information teams need to work through these steps to create common assessments to gauge student knowledge, respond to their needs, and ensure all students learn the essential information and skills to ensure their future success.

Overview of Chapters

We continue to believe that schools and districts need a balanced assessment system that includes both formative and summative assessments. We have found that merely labeling an assessment *formative* or *summative* rarely helps teams move forward. Rather, understanding the purpose of the assessment you're writing and using is the key to analyzing the information the assessment provides. We explore these issues in chapter 1, where we lay out our thinking about the types of questions teams can ask for different assessments. As we think about the term *simplify*, we believe that, for assessments, it starts here—understanding why and how a team creates a balanced assessment system with the important components but that isn't unnecessarily overwhelming.

In chapter 2, we help teams navigate their understanding of what their state standards mean and how they can build consensus about what proficiency will look like for students. We discuss the importance of answering the first critical question for collaborative teams: What knowledge, skills, and dispositions should every student acquire as a result of this unit, this course, or this grade level? Teams must identify and come to consensus on the essential standards they will guarantee for all students. We also explore how teams achieve collective clarity about proficiency when they work collaboratively to unwrap these standards.

In chapter 3, we take a more intensive look at rigor than we've previously done in our work. The term *rigor* has become so commonplace in our discussions that we worry it has lost its importance. In this chapter, we discuss how our focus on rigor must influence the work of assessment. In chapter 4, we follow up this discussion by looking at how high-performing teams can effectively align their curriculum, instruction, and assessment to the more rigorous standards they've adopted. We explore topics such as how often to give assessments and how we can find the time in an already jam-packed curriculum to respond to the results.

In chapter 5, we look at strategies for making the process of developing and writing assessments more practical for teachers. We lay out what's important in the process and make sense of specific steps and strategies teams can use to make their assessments more valid and reliable.

We know from our experiences working with teams that understanding how to effectively use the results from assessments is often a confusing step. We know that when teams collaboratively design a quality assessment, it will more easily lead to an effective team response. In chapter 6 we help teams work through this process collaboratively and share three specific strategies for using data to plan effective responses.

We explore issues related to grading and feedback in chapter 7. We discuss the difference between scoring and grading assessments, and how developing a growth mindset for both teachers and students can result in better use of assessment results to guide assessment work.

Finally, in chapter 8, we address the barriers that singleton teachers face when writing and responding to common assessments. We suggest ways vertical, interdisciplinary, cross-school and district, and electronic teams benefit from collaboratively writing quality assessments and responding to the results.

Throughout the book, we provide sample scenarios and note specific school and practitioner names. These names are fictitious, but the examples we provide are based on realities in our own experiences and within the schools and with the teachers we have worked with. For each chapter, we start with a list of the most common questions and challenges we encounter as we work with teams. We anticipate that as you use this book, these are some of the questions you might have heard from others or wanted to ask. These questions will be addressed throughout the chapter. At the end of each chapter, we also provide a section called Tips for Traction. Our purpose for providing these ideas is to help you identify what knowledge and actions will best move you and your team forward. We hope that these tips help you achieve better success and efficiency without taking the shortcuts we've seen others try that can result in skipping some important work.

We've also included an appendix containing an implementation road map for the process of developing and using quality common assessments. By using the road map throughout their journey, teams can identify where they are, progress they've made in their implementation, and what their next steps should be. The goal is to embrace and fully experience this journey—the results are worth it.

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