

COLLABORATIVE TEAMS THAT WORK

The definitive guide to
cycles of learning in a PLC

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Table of contents

Acknowledgements	iii
Contents	v
About the authors	vii
Preface	ix
Foreword by Anthony Muhammad	xiii
Introduction	1
Section 1: Preparing the learning	11
Action 1: Map the learning pathway	13
Action 2: Prepare the pre-assessment	25
Action 3: Administer the pre-assessment	33
Action 4: Respond to identified student learning needs	35
Action 5: Design the learning program	43
Section 2: Implementing the learning	49
Action 6: Implement the learning program	51
Action 7: Monitor the impact of instruction	57
Action 8: Analyse which instructional practices are having the greatest impact	63
Action 9: Adopt the most impactful instructional practices	69
Section 3: Reviewing the learning	75
Action 10: Administer the post-assessment	77
Action 11: Determine the team's impact on student learning	79
Action 12: Action the team's learnings	83

Section 4: An alternative approach	89
Starting the cycle of learning with a learning issue	90
Action 1: Identify the learning issue	95
Action 2: Prepare the pre-assessment	99
Action 3: Administer the pre-assessment	103
Action 4: Respond to identified student learning needs	105
Action 5: Design actions to address the learning issue	109
Action 6: Implement the learning actions	117
Action 7: Monitor the impact of actions	121
Action 8: Analyse which actions are having the greatest impact	125
Action 9: Administer the post-assessment	131
Action 10: Determine the team's impact on student learning	133
Action 11: Action the team's learnings	137
Section 5: Putting it all together	141
Conclusion	165
Appendix A: Tips for increasing productivity in collaborative teams	167
Appendix B: Sample collaborative team meeting agenda template	171
References	173
Index	177

Preface

Experts by experience

We first came across the term *experts by experience* when reading *The kindness method: Changing habits for good* by Shahroo Izadi. In her introduction, Izadi (2018) states, ‘the field of addiction recovery widely acknowledges the wisdom of “experts by experience” – people who’ve been there before us and done it. I am writing *The kindness method* partly as a practitioner, but mainly as an expert by experience’ (p. 10).

Just as in the field of addiction therapy, the field of education widely acknowledges the importance of experts by experience: those practitioners who support and lead others through transformational change, having been there and done it for themselves. That’s what we bring to this book. Our ideas, approaches and subsequent advice is based on over twenty years of working together and over a decade of leading and supporting schools to become high-functioning and successful professional learning communities (PLCs).

We have worked in schools across Australia, New Zealand and South-East Asia: sometimes in the same school, sometimes in different schools. We have worked with government, Catholic and independent school systems and schools, from small, rural primary schools to secondary schools that are bursting at the seams and everything in-between. Through these varied experiences we have observed firsthand many of the challenges that schools face in their efforts to cultivate a collaborative culture. In supporting schools through these challenges we have engaged with leadership, year-level, specialist, cross-discipline, faculty and department teams. Much of this work has been to assist these teams in ensuring their collaborative efforts strengthen curriculum and assessment, and ultimately to transform their instructional practices to improve learning outcomes.

Where it started for us

Influential to our commitment to PLC at Work[®] was the privilege of being involved in bringing the process to Australian schools. Working closely with Richard and Rebecca DuFour, we led the implementation of PLCs in Australian schools through three pilot programs over four years and in 2014 established the Centre for Professional Learning Communities, which has since become part of the PLC support now provided by Hawker Brownlow Education. In the years since, the school Colin led as principal became the first national model of a PLC at Work, while many other schools across the country embraced higher levels of teacher collaboration through a clearly articulated and operationalised mission and vision to ensure high levels of student achievement for all.

As we travelled from school to school we observed that common patterns of implementation confusion and uncertainty were making the PLC journey challenging. These issues ranged from a lack of understanding about what becoming a PLC would truly mean for everyone involved to staff blatantly resisting any change to the status quo.

Having supported a diverse range of teams from different backgrounds and experiences to implement the collaborative process, we have developed significant expertise in assisting schools to overcome these challenges while taking into account their own unique characteristics and contexts. Armed with firsthand knowledge of the tools, priorities and approaches that work for schools – and those that do not – it is now time for us to share this expertise.

Influences on this work

Along with the experience gained from learning by doing, this work also draws from the experiences of many generous and talented educators we've worked with over the years. Their thoughts, ideas and processes and the way they've translated ideas into action have been influential as we have trialled, modified and strengthened the cycle of learning process detailed in the pages that follow.

We also acknowledge the influence of both Cognitive CoachingSM and Adaptive Schools programs on our thinking. These bodies of work detail the necessary skills and provide educators with tools for high-level collaboration. In writing *Collaborative teams that work* we were mindful to not just create another book telling educators about the work that needs to be done. Instead we have focused on the processes through which schools can foster a safe and supportive team culture where educators can develop and strengthen their skills of working collaboratively as they actually do the work.

We are privileged to have worked alongside some of the world's leading researchers and practitioners in the field of PLCs, and this has heavily influenced our understanding of the actions collaborative teams must carry out. In particular, the PLC at Work process

has provided us with a genuine means of supporting schools in fundamentally changing the way they 'do' school (DuFour et al., 2017). We believe no other process that we've read, researched or seen in practice is as effective as when the PLC at Work process is implemented with fidelity and steadfast commitment. Having said that, we have written this book in part to fill the gap in the literature about the specific actions collaborative teams take when schools engage in this work earnestly.

Closely aligned with our PLC endeavours has been our work with Robert J Marzano and colleagues at Marzano Research in the areas of collaboration, instruction and assessment, and assisting in the publication of *Collaborative teams that transform schools: The next step in PLCs* (Marzano et al., 2016). This body of work provided us with further impetus to assist teams to achieve the ultimate goal of higher levels of learning for the students they serve. The very title of the book suggests that it is the collaborative teams themselves that are the key drivers for sustained cultural and structural change. This work in particular sharpened our focus on assisting schools to monitor their efforts in improving teaching practice and student learning as well as understand the importance of leadership to the success of teams' collective efforts.

The Marzano High Reliability Schools™ framework put forward in *A handbook for High Reliability Schools: The next step in school reform* (Marzano et al., 2014) has also been influential in our work with schools. With over forty years of school improvement research to draw from, this work reiterates the power of the PLC at Work process as a catalyst for deep, sustainable change in schools and highlights the importance of building a safe and supportive psychological space for successful collaboration.

In 2016 we contributed to *Transformative collaboration: Five commitments for leading a PLC* alongside our colleagues Tonia Flanagan, Kylie Lipscombe and Janelle Wills. Drawing from our collective expertise and published with a foreword by Alma Harris and Michelle Jones, *Transformative collaboration* assists schools to build the leadership capacity necessary to successfully manage their school's transformation into a PLC. The professional learning we subsequently provided in support of this work highlighted 'warts and all' how essential it is that leaders truly connect with the PLC process and genuinely accept that it can – and will – transform student and teacher learning.

These key works, combined with our ongoing collaboration with each other to find the most effective ways of supporting schools to become PLCs, led us to write this book. However, we didn't want to fall into the trap of spending the majority of our time admiring the problem and precious little time addressing it. Our approach with *Collaborative teams that work* has instead been to practise what we preach in schools: take the time necessary to identify problems, but spend the majority of our time inquiring into solutions.

Foreword

School improvement is such a hotly debated topic. Everyone involved with this debate recognises that the proper intellectual and social development of our children is the key to the prosperity of our society. I do not believe that anyone disagrees that schools can and must improve; any debate or disagreement must surely lie in how to accomplish this end. Should we extend the school year? Should we reduce class size? Should we increase school funding? Should we evaluate teachers more rigorously? So many opinions, but very few definitive answers can be found.

I struggled with this reality of school improvement as a new principal in 2001. I wondered if I should prescribe the teachers' duties and behaviours like an autocrat, or whether I should sit back and help the teachers *discover* what is best for their students. The answer came when I attended a PLC at Work® event in Lincolnshire, Illinois, in July that year. After attending this event, the evidence was clear: placing teachers into strong collaborative teams where they would engage in a process of continuous inquiry about their practice was the answer.

Once I returned to my school site, the *idea* and the *reality* of implementation were worlds apart. The speakers cited the research effortlessly and made the process sound so easy, and I had a vision of the type of healthy collaboration that was necessary to improve student performance, but there was no road map for leading the process. This lack of a clear path to creating strong collaborative teams resulted in a lot of mistakes and delays in improvement. In the beginning, I monitored the wrong work, did not construct teams properly and gathered the wrong artefacts. There was research and guidance available from the business community, but schools are unique entities. I felt as if we were building an aeroplane mid-flight.

Some of the questions that caused me to take pause included:

- What proof should I gather to verify good collaboration, and what is a fair standard of excellence?
- How involved should I be as a leader?

- How quickly should I expect teams to improve, and how much patience should I exercise?
- How should I respond to saboteurs and process resisters?
- How much time and how many resources should we invest to promote team growth?

As a leader, I knew that my contribution to school improvement was to develop, support and monitor strong collaborative teams of teachers. It took years of trial and error before our culture changed and we began to truly work collaboratively. This relentless focus helped our school evolve from a model of school failure to a lighthouse of educational achievement. Our school earned several local and national awards for excellence in student achievement, and in 2005 I was honoured as the Michigan Middle School Principal of the Year. In my acceptance speech I thanked my teachers for accepting the challenge to work collaboratively because, as a principal, I did not prepare one lesson, deliver one formative student assessment or provide one academic intervention; this was the work of the team. My effectiveness as a leader rested in my ability to break down the walls of isolation and create an environment where students could benefit from teachers' collective wisdom. This is the greatest contribution a school leader can make to improving educator effectiveness. Still, I always wondered, 'What would we have accomplished if our learning curve could have been shortened?'

The University of Chicago Consortium on School Research came to a similar conclusion about the role of the principal in school improvement (Allensworth & Hart, 2018). In a 2018 report on school improvement that included studying the progress of over six hundred low-performing elementary schools for eight years (2007–2014), the schools that made remarkable progress improved under the guidance of a leader who created the following professional culture:

1. *Successful principals develop systems for supporting teachers to support students ...*
2. *Successful principals are skilled in organizing and supporting shared leadership among staff ...*
3. *Successful principals manage shared leadership by guiding, coordinating, and monitoring the work of teachers and leaders in the school ...*
(Allensworth & Hart, 2018, p. 4)

It took me six years to figure out for myself what *Collaborative teams that work* explains as a logical and effective multi-stage process. This book is a gift to anyone who wants to support the development of strong collaborative teams but simply does not have access to the insight on how to do it.

Gavin Grift and Colin Sloper have provided practitioners with a guide that I would have given my right arm to have access to in 2001. The worlds of research and practice are more in harmony in 2020 than ever before in the history of our profession. Study after study implores schools to set up conditions that produce strong collaborative teams that engage in continuous cycles of the *right* work: curriculum, instruction, assessment, intervention and enrichment.

I encourage anyone who has access to this book to read it carefully and apply the lessons that are so masterfully laid out in what is a brilliant, research-based manifesto on producing the most valuable asset in any effective school: strong collaborative teams. Schools are institutions, and their educators are not islands. The more we harness the power of we, the less *we* will understand why we ever chose to work in isolation.

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Introduction

This book sets out an evidence-based process that collaborative teams can use to genuinely improve the achievement of all students in their school. Never before has there been such consensus on the elements that improve schools and student learning. While each school's unique context cannot be ignored, research highlights that a genuine focus on creating highly impactful collaborative teams must sit at the heart of any school- or system-improvement agenda (DuFour et al., 2017). Current research also indicates that teaching practice has the biggest influence on improving learning for students, outside of the students themselves (Hattie, 2012). The way to maximise this influence is to cultivate a collaborative culture where educators support one another to deeply examine their impact through focused inquiry and deliberate action. Such a culture leads to a genuine desire in teachers to evolve their professional practice to ensure all students succeed.

The action research that collaborative teams engage in forms the basis for job-embedded professional learning and is central to enhancing teaching practice. The cycle of learning process, which we've broken down into twelve actions in this book, is the most effective way to ensure that the work of collaborative teams continually enhances individual and collective teaching practice through job-embedded action research. We want teachers to leave every collaborative team meeting considerably more skilful in relation to their teaching practice than when they arrive. The twelve key actions that we describe in the following pages underpin the cycle of learning process and guarantee that each meeting becomes a focused professional learning experience for every team member, supporting and enhancing their shared responsibility for the learning of the students they serve.

The cycle of learning process and twelve actions address the current research regarding the impact that collective teacher efficacy has on student learning (Hattie, 2015). As teachers work through the cycle of learning process that we detail in this book, they will begin to identify successes, recognise difficulties as opportunities to learn and experience their colleagues' support as they enhance their individual and collective teaching practice. Implementation of the twelve actions and associated tasks supports the development of collective teacher efficacy and strengthens team members' shared belief that they can influence student outcomes in a positive way through collective action. As collaborative