



THE
**BIG
BOOK
TOOLS**

for Collaborative Teams

in a PLC at Work[®]

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Introduction

If there is one thing that we know about improving schools, it's that *nothing* has a greater impact on student learning than organizing teachers into collaborative teams committed to studying their practice together. These professional learning teams can do much more than their members can do alone. They act as engines that drive the greater school community. Teachers who study their practice together are more persistent, more likely to set challenging goals for themselves, and more likely to experiment with their instruction than teachers working in isolation (Donohoo, 2017). Studying practice together also builds professional confidence in collaborative teams, leaving teachers convinced that they have the shared capacity to drive meaningful change in their own classrooms. The result: members of collaborative teams are more likely to have a positive impact on *every* student—including those from disadvantaged backgrounds or those who have traditionally struggled in schools. Education researcher John Hattie (2017) calls this *collective teacher efficacy*. In his most recent summary of the work that we do in schools, Hattie (2017) places collective teacher efficacy first in a list of 252 practices ranked in order as having the greatest “potential to considerably accelerate student achievement.”

But ask teachers who have ever worked in a Professional Learning Community (PLC) at Work® and they will tell you that studying practice together isn't always as easy as it sounds. The greatest challenge for some learning teams is the energy and effort that studying practice together requires. Identifying essential outcomes, developing unit plans, and creating assessments together takes more time than doing that same work on your own—and it requires negotiation and compromise, something that teachers used to working in isolation are often unprepared for. Collective inquiry around instruction also requires *coordination*. Working interdependently to study practice depends on every member of a team teaching roughly the same content and skills at roughly the same time. If members struggle to keep up—or just plain disagree with shared pacing decisions—collective inquiry around instruction becomes impossible.

Learning teams can also struggle with the interpersonal skills necessary for working interdependently. Assertive members can dominate conversations and decisions, pushing their more measured colleagues away. Different pedagogical viewpoints or

professional experiences can cause teachers to openly question the intentions and abilities of their peers. New teachers—or teachers new to their teams—can defer to veteran colleagues, unwilling to challenge well-established social hierarchies in their schools or at their grade levels. Vulnerability and intellectual humility, traits essential to all those interested in learning from their peers, require high levels of trust that teachers used to working alone have never had to develop with one another before. Teams that suffer from these issues fall into uncomfortable and unproductive patterns of participation that limit the overall impact of their work, leading teachers to doubt the overall value of studying their practice together.

Finally, even seasoned learning teams can struggle with the core practices necessary to shift from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning. Unpacking complex objectives into individual learning targets, developing common formative assessments that provide actionable information, and tracking progress by both student and standard are often new behaviors for members of collaborative teams. Learning teams can also have skill gaps in data collection and analysis, finding it difficult to collect, sort, and learn from the results that they are gathering with one another. Lastly, learning teams can find it difficult to integrate timely and directive opportunities for intervention and extension into their instructional plans. Lacking clear processes for what serve as everyday activities on collaborative teams in PLCs can make initial attempts at studying practice together feel inefficient to teachers.

So, what's the best way to work through the challenges that can cause learning teams to stumble? Professional Learning Community at Work expert Richard DuFour (2004) offers a hint when he writes:

Collaborative conversations call on team members to make public what has traditionally been private—goals, strategies, materials, pacing, questions, concerns, and results. These discussions give every teacher someone to turn to and talk to, and they are explicitly structured to improve the classroom practice of teachers—individually and collectively. Teams must focus their efforts on crucial questions related to learning and generate products that reflect that focus, such as lists of essential outcomes, different kinds of assessment, analyses of student achievement, and strategies for improving results.

Can you spot the key in DuFour's quote? Overcoming the challenges of working as a team depends on discussions that are *explicitly structured to improve classroom practice* and *focused on the generation of products* (DuFour, 2004).

Chances are that your learning team is already generating lots of shared products: unit plans, lists of students in need of remediation, extension activities, and data analysis tools and protocols. And chances are that you *enjoy* generating products with one

another. Generating products feels a lot like planning to learning teams, particularly when those same products can be used as part of the daily work of individual teachers. Each useful product that a team generates serves as a tangible reminder that time spent working together is worthwhile. But here is a question worth asking: “Are the work products that your learning team is generating *explicitly structured to improve classroom practice?*”

The Big Book of Tools for Collaborative Teams in a PLC at Work is a collection of resources designed to provide that explicit structure for your learning team. The first chapter provides guidance for beginning work with your learning team. Then, chapters 2 through 5 contain resources organized to mirror the four critical questions of learning in a PLC at Work, as proposed by Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker, Thomas W. Many, and Mike Mattos (2016).

- **Chapter 1, “Strengthening the Collegial Practices of Learning Teams”:** Collaborative teams establish a solid foundation of collegial practices that govern their work. The tools in this chapter are designed to help your team build this foundation. They include templates for establishing norms, building trust, resolving conflict, creating agendas, and monitoring the quality of work that teams are doing together.
- **Chapter 2, “What Do We Want Students to Learn?”:** Collaboration that improves the classroom practice of teachers starts with the development of a guaranteed and viable curriculum. The tools in this chapter are designed to help your team develop this curriculum. They include templates for identifying essential standards, communicating expected outcomes to learners, writing SMART goals (Conzemius & O’Neill, 2014), and developing comprehensive plans for units of instruction.
- **Chapter 3, “How Will We Know Students Are Learning?”:** Collaboration that improves the classroom practice of teachers also depends on using assessments to collect evidence of the impact that our professional choices are having on learners. The tools in this chapter are designed to build the assessment capacity of your learning team. They include templates for writing common formative assessments; collecting, organizing, and learning from data; turning students into partners in the assessment process; and reflecting on instructional strengths and weaknesses.
- **Chapter 4, “How Will We Respond When Some Students Don’t Learn?”:** Collaboration that improves the classroom practice of teachers always results in action on behalf of students. The tools in this chapter are designed to help your team integrate interventions for remediation into your instruction. They include templates for tracking student interventions, documenting the common misconceptions identified during a unit of instruction, creating

student intervention reports, and reflecting on the effectiveness of individual intervention strategies.

- **Chapter 5, “How Will We Extend Learning When Students Are Already Proficient?”:** Collaborative teams recognize that taking action on behalf of students doesn’t just refer to providing interventions to students who are struggling to master essential outcomes. It also means extending learning for students who are already proficient with grade-level essentials. The tools in this chapter are designed to strengthen the work that your team does with these “question 4” students. They include templates for planning weekly extensions, increasing the cognitive complexity of existing tasks, and developing tiered lesson plans.

The content included in *The Big Book of Tools for Collaborative Teams in a PLC at Work* is also organized into two separate sections within each chapter: (1) the five fundamentals and (2) additional resources for extending the work of your team. The five fundamentals are the five most important templates in the entire chapter. They are designed to provide explicit structure to core behaviors that your team simply can’t live without. For example, readers will find resources for setting norms and for coming to consensus in the five fundamentals for chapter 1 because those behaviors are essential to collaborative success. Additional resources for extending the work of your team are supplementary templates designed to help your team go beyond core behaviors and navigate unique situations. In chapter 1, for instance, those resources include strategies for resolving conflict between colleagues and for evaluating the levels of trust on your learning team. Throughout the text, I have included samples that show the more complex tools filled out so you can get a better idea of how you can use them in your work. You can find these immediately following their corresponding templates.

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