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FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF SCHOOL LEADERS ENSURING SUCCESS FOR ALL STUDENTS

Making the most of PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

BY JAY MCTIGHE

A growing number of educators are involved in professional learning communities in their schools. Once professional learning communities are established educators must ask these questions: What is the role of professional learning communities in a school? How do we ensure that a professional learning community achieves its desired results? What should teachers do when they meet in learning teams? In other words, how do we make the most of professional learning communities?

This article describes three recommended roles for members of a professional learning community: critical friend, analyst of student work, and continuous learner.

ROLE #1: **CRITICAL FRIEND**

A cross-grade level team meets monthly to exchange unit plans for critical friend feedback. Allison and Tom, 4th-grade teachers, give copies of their upcoming interdisciplinary unit on the rain forest to 5th-grade teachers Everett and Elizabeth in exchange for their E/LA poetry unit. Following reading and paired discussions of the two units, each grade-level team shares feedback and suggestions.

Elizabeth and Everett suggest several essential questions for the rain forest unit that can be productively revisited in 5th grade. The four teachers brainstorm ideas for a performance task that assesses several of the unit's interdisciplinary learning targets. Allison and Tom commend the engaging learning activities of the poetry unit, but point out that the proposed

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assessment evidence does not align completely with the unit goals. Elizabeth and Everett discuss ways to sharpen the assessments. Tom suggests a web site where students can read student poems and publish their own poems. Everett and Elizabeth are thrilled to learn about this excellent new resource for their unit.

Most teachers plan lessons and units of study based on an established curriculum framework. However, teacher-developed plans are typically created in isolation and (with the exception of untenured beginners) are rarely reviewed by administrators or colleagues. Moreover, teachers can sometimes get too close to their work and have difficulty seeing weaknesses. As an antidote to this, involve *all* teachers as "critical friends" to colleagues to review unit plans, lessons and assessments, and provide helpful feedback.

The culture in many schools does not invite collegial feedback. Indeed, teachers are more likely to reflect a "go it alone" ethos where "academic freedom" translates into "let me close my door and do my thing." Even in collaborative school cultures, educators tend to avoid criticizing each other's professional practices. Yet, we know feedback is necessary for improvement. Honest, specific, and descriptive feedback from peers can be invaluable to beginners and support even effective teachers in moving from good to great. Consequently, I recommend that structured opportunities for peer reviews of each other's plans be included as an explicit expectation of professional learning communities.

Any peer review process should be guided by an agreed-upon protocol and set of review criteria so that the feedback is "standards based" and de-personalized.

Since any critical friend process may run counter to prevailing school norms, leaders are advised to begin slowly to help staff become comfortable with peer review. For example, model the process with a lesson or unit plan developed elsewhere. Discuss the roles of reviewers and designers. (Use a fishbowl process to model these roles.) Ask for volunteers who will submit their own units or assessment tasks for peer review, and invite them to share the benefits

of peer feedback. Involve more staff in peer review as teachers become more familiar and comfortable with the process. Grade-level, subject-area teams or more heterogeneous groups (three to seven teachers each) can conduct peer reviews. When beginning, do peer reviews once a semester. Once the benefits are realized, staff may seek more frequent peer feedback.

Time spent in collaborative planning and peer review can reduce teacher isolation while enhancing effectiveness. When PLC team members engage in peer feedback sessions, they are walking the talk of standards-based education by applying standards to their own work — a hallmark of true professionalism.

ROLE #2: **ANALYST OF STUDENT WORK**

Three times a year, the secondary English teachers meet in grade-level groups to evaluate student work from district writing assessments. Student papers from various classes are mixed and divided among pairs of teachers. Using a common rubric, the pairs score the papers and discuss their judgments (for inter-rater reliability). As part of the process, the entire grade-level team identifies "anchor" papers that illustrate the various performance levels of the rubric. The selected anchors are then annotated with comments in the margin, describing the paper's strengths and weaknesses. The scoring session concludes with the team identifying areas of needed instructional emphasis and sharing successful strategies and resources for addressing weaknesses.

Increasingly, educators are being encouraged to use "data" as a basis for instructional decision making and school improvement planning. How does a school or district become data-driven? In some cases, school and district administrators dissect annual test score reports and summarize the results for teachers. Although this is surely better than nothing, such an approach to data analysis will have less impact if it bypasses teachers. As an alternative, I recommend that teachers be *actively involved* in analyzing achievement data and formulating improvement plans so they will learn more about

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NSDC TOOL / **Questions to ask when examining student work**

DESCRIBE

- What knowledge and skills are assessed?
- What kinds of thinking are required (e.g. recall, interpretation, evaluation)?
- Are these the results I (we) expected? Why or why not?
- In what areas did the student(s) perform best?
- What weaknesses are evident?
- What misconceptions are revealed?
- Are there any surprises?
- What anomalies exist?
- Is there evidence of improvement or decline? If so, what caused the changes?

EVALUATE

- By what criteria am I (are we) evaluating student work?
- Are these the most important criteria?
- How good is "good enough" (e.g. the performance standard)?

INTERPRET

- What does this work reveal about student learning and performance?
- What patterns are evident?
- What questions does this work raise?
- Is this work consistent with other achievement data?
- Are there different possible explanations for these results?

IDENTIFY IMPROVEMENT ACTIONS

- What teacher action(s) would improve learning and performance?
- What student action(s) would improve learning and performance?
- What systemic action(s) at the school/district level would improve learning and performance (e.g. changes in curriculum, schedule, grouping)?

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and "own" student performance data.

While results from an external test certainly provide data on student achievement, an annual "snapshot" is not sufficiently detailed or timely enough to inform and guide continuous improvement actions at the classroom and school levels. A more robust approach to school improvement calls for staff to engage in an ongoing analysis of student performance data from *multiple sources*. What is needed, metaphorically speaking, is a "photo album" of evidence, including results from traditional tests along with a collection of student work generated from local assessment tasks. Mike Schmoker (2003) underscores this point:

"Using the goals that they have established, teachers can meet regularly to improve their lessons and assess their progress using another important source: formative assessment data. Gathered every few weeks or at each grading period, formative data enable the team to gauge levels of success and to adjust their instructional efforts accordingly. Formative, collectively administered assessments allow teams to capture and celebrate short-term results, which are essen-

tial to success in any sphere" (p. 22).

When teachers meet in role-alike professional learning teams (e.g. by grade level and subject areas) to evaluate the results from assessments, they begin to identify general *patterns* of strengths as well as areas needing improvement. Wiggins and McTighe (2007) offer questions to guide their evaluation and analysis of student work and their planned adjustments to improve the results (see box above).

By regularly using such questions to examine student work, teachers properly focus on the broader learning goals (including understanding, transfer, habits of mind), while avoiding a fixation on standardized test scores only. The regular use of such a professional learning process provides the fuel for continuous improvement while establishing a professionally enriching, results-oriented culture. This approach is familiar to coaches of team sports and sponsors of extracurricular activities such as drama and band. As an example, football coaches often meet at someone's home or apartment to review game film from Saturday's game and *then* plan next

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week's practices based on their collective analysis of the team's weaknesses. Why not adopt these proven performance-enhancing methods from the arts and athletics in a more deliberate way for general schooling?

ROLE #3: **CONTINUOUS LEARNER**

A middle school principal asked teachers to come up with a list of the most promising-sounding "best practices" appropriate for their school. The eventual list was whittled down to six (e.g. differentiated instruction, authentic assessment, etc.). He then asked teachers to divide themselves into small groups(three to five teachers each) to research and develop one of the six identified topics over the next two years. Eventually, they would report back to the entire staff on their learning about the "best practice" and its effects on student learning. Many teachers reported that this single action dramatically changed the school culture and led to demonstrable improvements in student attitude and achievement.

School or district mission statements often include a reference to developing the capabilities and dispositions for lifelong learning. I contend that this mission applies to staff as well as to students. Indeed, continuous learning is a hallmark of professionalism in any field and especially relevant to a profession devoted to learning. Thus, an explicit and expected part of a teacher's job should involve continuous learning — about subject matter, about teaching effectiveness, and about ways of enhancing learning. Additionally, teachers should learn how to evaluate the results of their teaching (described in Role #2) and how to use feedback to become more effective (described in Role #1).

There are numerous ways in which educators can keep abreast of current research on teaching and learning, such as taking university classes, participating in professional organizations, and attending regional or national conferences. Unfortunately, most practicing teachers do not regularly engage in these professional learning options. What is needed is *on-the-job*

learning for *all* teachers. In other words, continuous learning about relevant research and best practices should be "job-embedded" as a regular and expected part of a teacher's responsibilities. Professional learning communities are ideally suited to support this role.

Here's a straightforward tactic for instigating this idea. A school principal selects five articles describing research-based instructional practices. He asks each teacher to read one of the articles and prepare to discuss it at a forthcoming staff meeting. At that meeting, teachers use a "jigsaw" process to discuss the articles and thus have the opportunity to explore new ideas and discuss their practical implications as part of a regularly scheduled staff meeting.

Initially, school and district administrators might assume primary responsibility for locating and distributing articles and research summaries. Then, school administrators and teacher leaders (e.g. department chairpersons and middle school/grade-level team leaders) would lead discussions as part of scheduled meetings. Eventually, though, individuals and teams would be encouraged to initiate and manage such job-embedded learning experiences.

In addition to professional reading, all teachers should take part in staff development to expand their knowledge and skills. Along with traditional professional development activities, teachers would have an array of possibilities for enhancing their learning, including professional reading, peer-to-peer coaching and mentoring arrangements, and personalized growth plans. One particularly robust form of professional learning experience is action research.

Action research involves ongoing, collaborative inquiry into matters of teaching and learning. Action research empowers faculties to identify problems and shape solutions. It operates under the assumption that local educators, not outside experts, know best about where and how to improve their schools. It fosters a culture of collaborative problem solving and a team-oriented approach to school improvement. It puts a capital "P" in professionalism because it offers the potential to add to the knowledge base of our field.

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NSDC TOOL / **Examples of possible action research projects**

SHADOW A STUDENT FOR A DAY.

Pick a student at random and follow that student for a day. As you "walk in their shoes" consider questions such as, Is their schoolwork engaging? Boring? Do the learners see purpose in what they are learning? Are they exploring big ideas? What are your impressions of their school experiences? Take notes and report on your experiences at the next faculty meeting.

A PLACE CALLED SCHOOL – REPRISE.

Repeat the classic John Goodlad survey as to which courses students see as most engaging (and why), as most worthwhile (and why); as most and least challenging, etc. Share your findings with the rest of the faculty.

QUESTIONING STRATEGIES.

Monitor your use of classroom questioning. What percentage of my questions require factual recall? Application? Synthesis or evaluation? What are the results of asking different types of questions? What happens when I use various follow-up strategies; e.g., Wait time? Probes? Play devil's advocate? Visit other teachers' classrooms and take note of their questioning strategies. Then, share your findings.

SURVEY GRADUATES.

Contact recent high school graduates. Ask them to describe the extent to which their K-12 schooling prepared them for future study and the world of work. In what ways were they well prepared? In what ways might their schools have prepared them better? Present and discuss survey results with teachers and administrators.

DO STUDENTS UNDERSTAND THE GOALS AND PRIORITIES?

What will students say if you ask them "Why are you doing what you are doing?" "How does yesterday's lesson relate to today's?" "What do you predict we will be doing tomorrow?" "What is your long-term goal for this unit?" "How will your learning be judged?" Compare your findings with other teachers and discuss the implications of the finding.

REVERSE NORMAL SEQUENCE.

Using two classes (one as a control), alter the normal sequence for a unit. In one class, immerse students in examining essential questions around provocative issues or problems, and only teach the "basics" on an as needed basis. In the control class, "cover" the basics using a textbook. How do the two classes compare in terms of student engagement and interest in the topic? Use the same assessment for both groups. What are the results?

GRADING AND REPORTING INQUIRY.

Survey students and parents regarding the current grading and reporting system. To what extent do they think grades and reports are understandable? Consistent among teachers? Fair? Accurately communicate student performance, progress and work habits? Compile and report on your findings and discuss the implications for current practice.

Unlike the sometimes esoteric research studies conducted in universities by degree-pursuing students or by faculty members needing publications, action research projects are initiated and conducted by PLC teams of practicing educators, and focus on relevant learning issues. See the box above for a few examples of generic action research possibilities for introducing the process.

CONCLUSION

The ideas presented offer specific ways to harness the power of professional learning communities to enhance the quality of teacher planning, examine achievement results, collaboratively plan for school improvement, and continuously learn about teaching and learning. Acting on these ideas offers a means of helping staff become more efficient and effective at achieving desired learning results. ■

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