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The Business of PLCs

PLCs IN CONTEXT

The Evolution of PLCs

It's impossible to pinpoint exactly, but an argument could be made that the earliest incarnation of PLCs came from the work of Ted Sizer and the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES) in the late 1980s. They were called Critical Friends Groups (CFGs) back then, not PLCs, but they were based on many of the same guiding principles: groups of 6–12 teachers meeting regularly to look at teaching and learning in ways that improve their craft through focused dialogue and honest examination of their work and the work of their students. I was part of CFGs back then, trained to coach a CFG, and later assigned to train other coaches to lead their own CFGs. The work was rewarding and challenging and I learned many lessons along the way about what made these groups most effective.

Teachers who were members of CFGs back in the early 1990s learned quickly the advantages of being part of a collaborative team. They learned how carefully facilitated, structured mechanisms in place for honestly examining student and teacher work fostered growth in the teachers and improved the learning of their students. These mechanisms were greatly influenced by the work of Joe McDonald and Steven Allen (who replaced Grant Wiggins as senior researcher for CES), who designed the now famous Tuning Protocol for looking at student and teacher work. From there many other protocols came to be, and CFGs spread throughout the nation as ways to make a real difference in student achievement and teacher practice (Nave, 2000).

When No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation passed in 2001, state testing became the focus of every school, every principal, and by default, every teacher. CFGs that were born of CES were still widespread and active, but the emphasis morphed from student *learning* to student *performance* on state exams. Somewhere in the mix, the value of teachers working collaboratively on examining and improving their craft took a back seat to the drive to raise test scores—as if the two were mutually exclusive. Teachers returned to a competitive rather than cooperative mentality for survival reasons. The value of collaboration dropped to a low priority. In time, this isolation began to change and books by Mike Schmoker and Becky and Rick DuFour reminded us that real improvement in student learning happens best in the context of what became labeled *Professional Learning Communities* (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008; Schmoker, 2006). Teachers and administrators once again came to believe that an increase in student achievement on state tests was inexplicably linked to teachers working together.

Here we are a decade later, knowing that PLCs—when done well—can change the way teachers do business and really make a difference in student learning, whether they measure that difference by state tests or by what teachers learn about their kids, independent of state tests. Arguably, PLCs can be the most efficient, least costly way of improving student learning. One reason for this is that PLCs act as a job-embedded source of sustained professional development for the teachers who would be part of them.

The Job of PLCs

PLCs exist to improve student learning by making teachers more effective in the work of teaching. In *Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work,* Rick DuFour and colleagues outline three Big Ideas of PLCs: *Focus on Learning, Building a Collaborative Culture,* and *Focus on Results* (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006). The authors go on to identify six Essential Characteristics of PLCs that in part restate the three Big Ideas, adding[1] to the mix *Shared Vision, Collective Inquiry,* and *Commitment to Continuous Improvement* (DuFour et al., 2006).

Together, the three Big Ideas and the six Essential Characteristics provide the necessary mindset for schools attempting to establish effective PLCs. But when schools cherry pick the Big Ideas and Essential Characteristics in isolation without careful examination of the rest of the context and contents provided by DuFour, they can have widely variant views of the meanings of terms like *Building a Collaborative Culture, Focus on Learning,* and *Focus on Results.* When this is the case (as it has been in my experience), these terms become vague notions and merely add to our educational vernacular, joining the abstruse ranks of terms like *rigor* and *shared leadership.*

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1. In proper chronology, DuFour started with the six Essential Characteristics and boiled these down to the three Big Ideas (DuFour, 2008).

Schools needed, in my experience working with them, to know what they should be doing, to *Focus on Learning* and *Focus on Results.* What did these focus points look like when they were played out in real schools? What did teachers do, exactly, and how did they do it?

To provide more traction to the ideas behind and characteristics of authentic PLCs, I suggest three *Essential Tasks of Authentic PLCs* to help schools narrow their focus:

1. Looking at student and teacher work

2. Designing quality common formative assessments (CFAs)

3. Reviewing and responding to data

Although PLCs may be continually engaged in these tasks, simply doing so may be insufficient in identifying a team as an authentic PLC. The *how* and not merely the *what* define PLC authenticity and we'll explore the *how* later. For now, let's examine how the Big Ideas align with the three Essential Tasks. Figure 1.1 shows how DuFour's three Big Ideas fit seamlessly with the Essential Tasks.

To be sure, it is possible for schools to have PLCs of limited or questionable authenticity and yet still be involved in looking at student work, writing CFAs, looking at data, and so on. If a teacher team is an authentic PLC, it generally follows that the teachers are engaged in certain tasks

Figure 1.1   Essential Tasks of Authentic PLCs and DuFour's Big Ideas
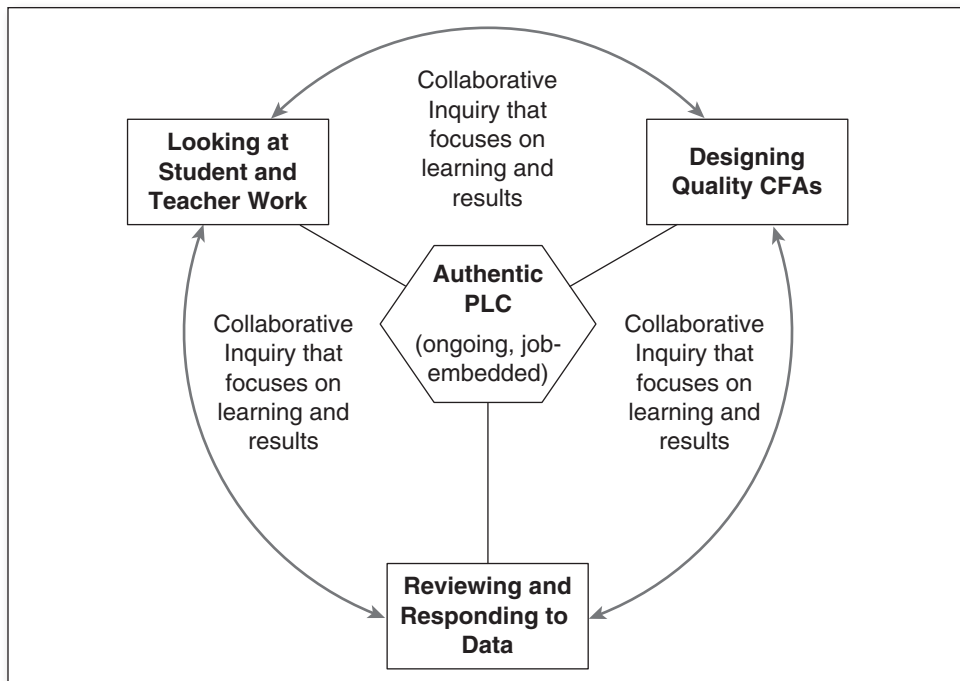
(the Essential Tasks); however, the converse is not necessarily true. Being engaged in the tasks, while necessary, is an insufficient condition for characterizing the teacher team as an authentic PLC. As we'll see in subsequent chapters, there is more to each of these Essential Tasks than meets the eye. Reviewing and responding to data, for example, means more than a cursory review of End-of-Year state test scores. Instead, it favors an ongoing practice that subscribes to the notion that data are vastly more abundant and continuous than the one-shot summative ilk of state assessments. Accordingly, so must be our use of that data in order to make important instructional decisions. Likewise, looking at teacher work implies more than individual teachers sharing what they're working on without a culture or mechanism for offering serious feedback to one another. Designing quality formative assessments involves more than teacher teams coming together to edit a textbook-published chapter test. Quality formative assessments are standards-based and their creation impacts not only what teachers assess and how they do so but also how teachers grade students and keep track of student mastery in grade books. In any discussion of *what* happens in effective PLCs—the business of PLCs—it is imperative to keep in mind something that seems to continually escape the multitude of reform efforts to improve student achievement: There is an obscure difference between the *means* and the *ends.* Having PLCs, doing the work of authentic PLCs, is not the end in and of itself. The "doings" of PLCs are essentially a set of *means* that can positively impact the *end,* which is without exception to improve student learning. This may seem obvious, but, in assisting schools with this work, I have learned that this distinction is crucial if teachers are to keep their primary focus on *what is accomplished* in terms of student learning and not on *what is done* in the PLC.

The Culture of PLCs

Time spent in an effective PLC meeting is very often different from the time typically spent in other teacher meetings. It feels different, it looks different, and in many ways it is the first time teachers experience a professional meeting that is not chock-full of announcements and housekeeping items that in no clear way have anything to do with teaching and learning. PLCs are focused completely on student learning, have a tenor of real and honest dialogue, and refrain from divergent conversations. PLC meetings have an atmosphere of identifying, investigating, and solving problems related to learning. For this reason, PLCs are not so much a *thing* as they are a *culture.* They are a way of thinking. *Things* can be done—often quickly—but culture develops through time. Consider Figure 1.2 as it compares the modus operandi of PLCs to that of other typical teacher meetings.

Figure 1.2   PLC Meetings Versus Typical Teacher Meetings

	Typical Teacher Meetings	*PLC Meetings*
Sense of Purpose	Often Vague Usually Not Discussed	Clear Frequent Reminders
Style of Meetings	Faculty Meetings Department Meetings	Work Groups
Focus of Agenda	Often Housekeeping Often Announcements Sharing of Anecdotal Stories Sometimes Gripe Sessions	1. Student Learning 2. Collaborative Designing 3. Collecting and Responding to Data
Basis for Discourse	Being Cordial, Being Cooperative	Being Trusting Being Honest
Leader/Facilitator	Directs Speaks a Lot Answers Easy Questions	Guides Listens a Lot Asks Hard Questions
Participants	Often Complacent Usually Compliant	Interested Involved
Agenda	Fixed Mostly Dictated	Flexible Shared
Atmosphere	Commiserating	Problem Solving
Silence Due to . . .	Passive Disagreement or Passive Acceptance	Reflection Deep Thinking
Mentality	"How will this idea impact me?"	"How will this idea impact student learning?"
Time Together	Mostly Self-Contained, Often Isolated	Ongoing, Sustained, Connected
Questioning and Disagreeing	Tacitly Discouraged	Openly Embraced
Attitudes That Are Valued	Being Positive Conforming	Always Being Truthful, Getting Results
Collaboration	Too Often Superficial	Essential
Decision Making Litmus Test	What's Good for the Teachers	What's Good for the Students

Many of the characteristics listed in Figure 1.2 are cultural in nature. They exemplify a shift in teacher culture, one that de-emphasizes isolation and individual teacher ego in favor of a culture in which goal-oriented, honest collaboration replaces the status quo.

MEETING LOGISTICS

When, How Long, and How Often

PLCs can vary widely in their size and makeup but the ideal size of a PLC is somewhere around six to eight teachers. Many PLCs work fine with as few as four teachers or as many as twelve. If the number of participants falls below four or climbs above twelve, the group's dynamics make the work more challenging and generally less productive. PLCs that are too small or too large suffer from a deficit or excess of varying perspectives (see *Establishing PLC Teams,* Chapter 2).

For teachers to adequately benefit from being in a PLC, I recommend teams meet at least weekly, for at least an hour each time. If the meetings are less than an hour—even though PLC meetings are characteristically focused— there is simply insufficient time to adequately practice protocols for reviewing student and teacher work and other tasks that require time. Additionally, most every meeting should end with a debriefing of the process, which is normally brief but requires time. Rushing the debriefing process or skipping it altogether retards the growth of the PLC toward efficiency. Joe McDonald has argued that if teams don't have time to debrief protocols, then they don't have time to do them (McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & McDonald, 2007).

Many PLCs meet during teacher common planning times built into the school schedule, since common planning has become widespread in school districts nationally. Provided these periods are 60 to 90 minutes in length, this is the ideal time for PLCs to meet. If periods are shorter, as in some elementary and middle schools whose periods are closer to 45 minutes in length, it may be best to have PLCs meet immediately after school twice or three times a month for 60 to 90 minutes. Of course, as every classroom teacher will attest, teachers are understandably exhausted by the end of the day and the prospect of a PLC meeting after a long day of teaching—however valuable they may regard the meetings—is tiresome. Several districts in which I consult have adopted early dismissal days for students twice a month, providing PLCs the afternoons on these days to delve more deeply into their work. The decision to adopt such a schedule is one made by the principal and doing so communicates loudly and clearly to the staff that this work is a priority, so important that the normally static schedule is worth modifying to accommodate PLCs.

In short, PLCs should meet during the school day if possible when time is sufficient and after school when it is not. PLCs should meet no less frequently than once a week. Keep in mind that those PLCs that meet several times a week stand to progress several times faster than those PLCs meeting only once a week.

Agendas

As noted previously, PLC agendas differ significantly from agendas that characterize other types of teacher meetings. PLCs generally (1) begin with some review of the group's norms (see Chapter 2); (2) hear an update from persons who may have presented work at the last meeting, sharing changes implemented based on the feedback received at the previous meeting; (3) proceed with some task-experience such as the following: looking at student work using a protocol, problem-solving a teacher dilemma or issue using a protocol, engaging in a text-based discussion, writing a common assessment, reviewing data, designing a plan for instructional intervention, or designing a common lesson or unit; and (4) close with a debriefing of the process that occurred during the task-experience. The debriefing process is generally followed by a short discussion about the agenda for the next meeting (e.g., who will bring student work, who will follow up on which items, what homework or reading will be completed for next time, etc.). Figure 1.3 summarizes how a typical 60-minute PLC meeting might be organized.

THE ROLES OF THE PLAYERS

The Principal and Assistant Principals

First and foremost, principals must be 100% committed to making effective PLCs at their schools a top priority. Most every other district initiative and most other programs being implemented at the building level can be done within the framework of PLCs. PLCs are not an add-on to already full plates; they provide the structure for effectively dealing with most of the other stuff on the plate. Principals must embrace this notion.

If the faculty senses an insincere belief on the part of the principal that PLCs can really make a difference, the PLCs are doomed to fail. Worse, without clear and decisive support, the faculty will very likely corrupt the PLC experience and actually come away with the point of view that PLCs are just another top-down decision that has no significant impact on student learning and achievement. Once this happens—as it typically has in many schools with previous failed initiatives—it is difficult to go back and "do it right." For this reason, it is imperative that principals believe in the potential of PLCs. They must understand that as instructional leaders of their schools they are building capacity in their faculties to work together in an honest and collaborative way to really impact student achievement.

With the exception of leading the Coaches PLC (CPLC), principals generally do not participate in the individual PLCs. Of course, principals should and normally do attend the meetings of individual PLCs in their schools. This is part of their support. But while attending individual PLC meetings, they should sit on the sidelines and observe and refrain from participating within the groups. There are important reasons for this. Principals who constantly interject their thoughts while the PLC does its work stand to retard the very capacity the principals are trying to build in their faculties. If the principal does engage in this

Figure 1.3   Typical 60-Minute PLC Agenda

Activity	Description/Examples	Time Allotted
Review of Group Norms	Norms are read aloud. One reader per norm. Periodically norms are announced from memory.	2 minutes
Previous Presenter Update (if applicable)	"What changes/modifications have been implemented since the feedback from the last meeting? How are they working?"	2 minutes
Task-Experience **Notes** *Many of these tasks are done using protocols (protocols are explained in detail in Chapter 3).* *Some tasks are ongoing and others are self-contained.* *Some tasks require less time and can be grouped with other shorter tasks in the same 60-minute time period (e.g., doing a text-based discussion and also updating norms).*	• Review/Update Group Norms • Text-Based Discussion • Looking at Student Work • Looking at Teacher Work • Problem-Solving Issue/Dilemma • Reviewing Data • Designing a Lesson/Unit • Writing a Common Formative Assessment • Designing Instructional Intervention • Planning Action Research • "Unpacking" State Standards • Deciding "Power" Standards (Essential Learning Outcomes) • Peer Observation Visits • Peer Observation Conferencing	50 minutes
Debrief	Discussion of the process used to work on Task-Experience: *What worked well? What might work better?*	3 minutes
Next Agenda	• Who will present next time (if applicable)? • Follow-up responsibilities • Homework or reading to be completed prior to next meeting • Next steps in continuing today's work or goal for next meeting	3 minutes

kind of direct leadership, the PLC soon grows dependent on the principal to move the group forward and teachers in the PLC fail to grow dependent on one another. True PLC collaboration means that members become increasingly dependent on fellow members in making decisions, gaining insights, and solving individual and collective problems related to teaching and learning.

But what if, while principals are observing these PLCs, they have insightful input ("burning comments," as one principal called them) to contribute? The only time principals should be heard from is after the PLC, under the leadership of a capable coach, has fully debriefed the meeting or protocol as

a group. Only then should principals share those insightful comments. This is how principals build capacity in their faculties: by letting PLCs "have at it." PLCs need to build shared experiences and knowledge with which to explore their teaching and the learning of their students. For some principals who are more comfortable directing rather than watching and listening, this new role is a challenge. (To help this, I suggest that principals who are observing a PLC meeting physically sit away from the group, in the "outer" circle, so that their presence does not in any way jeopardize the level of trust and honesty that is being developed or has been established by the group.)

Principals have much to gain from abiding by this, and they quickly acquire comfort with a more passive leadership role as they begin to see their faculties grow into self-assisting, interdependent teams of teachers.

The PLC Coach

Notwithstanding the importance of the principal's support and his leadership role in the CPLC, the role of the PLC coach or facilitator is paramount to the success of the PLC. It is in their delicate care that PLCs tend toward effectiveness or tend toward superficiality. Coaches are charged with the challenging but doable task of keeping the PLC moving forward, constantly weighing the needs and readiness of the group as a whole with the needs and readiness of individual group members. Coaches walk that fine line between uniting the group and pushing members to ask and answer the hard questions of each other that are inherent in any honest and authentic dialogue revolving around student learning. Through focused examination of teacher and student work, realistic analyses of available data, and responding to what the data reveal, coaches lead the group to improvement that transcends the benefits characteristic of the usual barrage of less effective professional development opportunities.

The credo of an authentic PLC is engaging in honest dialogue about what is happening in the classroom and what is needed to happen. The interest of participants in feeling good and speaking anecdotally and superficially about student learning becomes less important than their pursuit of having authentic dialogue. Teachers who are a part of an effective PLC know that the time for teacher "show & tell" is over; it is time to dig deeper and look constructively and collaboratively at what teachers do and explore the hard questions: Is this working? How will this improve student learning? This is the beacon for all PLC discourse and it is these questions, constantly raised and addressed by a capable PLC coach, which will make a difference.

Fortunately for those selected to coach these groups, there are ways to facilitate authentic dialogue. Procedures and strategies to effectively coach an authentic PLC are fully discussed in Part III.

The Participants

Let's face it: The participants in PLCs are ordinary teachers who have been asked (told?) to be members of a PLC. They may be willing to do the work,

but in all honesty, they may have no real idea of what it is they're being asked to do. That's okay. If the principal and coaches do their jobs, participants begin to understand that PLCs cut through the familiar experience of meetings marked by general housekeeping, calendar notices, and ineffective conversations about teaching and learning. Teachers quickly appreciate the focus and productivity of PLCs, and they become a stronger faculty in general as they work deliberately in trying to improve their craft and help other teachers improve. With a little experience, participants routinely report their impatience with other teacher meetings, commenting that these other meetings are often "distractions" that stray from the real goal of improving learning. When this happens, it's a sure sign that the PLCs are working well and that they have taken hold of a new teacher culture in the school. This is inevitable; PLCs done well change expectations in the way teachers talk about school. What was once the status quo for teacher discourse becomes transparently inert.

That said, teachers in PLCs vary widely in their initial embrace of the work, their acquired appreciation of the work, and the extent to which the work of the PLC positively transforms their own teaching and assumptions about learning. In Chapter 6, we explore these differences in teacher PLC-readiness and offer insights and strategies for coaches to deal effectively with all of the teachers in their PLCs.

SUMMARY: PLCs

PLCs have been around for almost two decades, and while they are not a new idea, their recent popularity in schools is. When PLCs are authentic, the teacher culture of a school shifts from one of teachers working in isolation and competition to one in which teachers not only collaborate effectively but grow interdependent on each other, improving their individual and collective effect on learning.

PLCs can be structured a variety of ways; some teams are subject-specific, others are grade-specific (and therefore interdisciplinary). In fact, in many schools, teachers serve as members of both types of PLCs. Ideally, in a school whose culture is truly collaborative, every teacher meeting is a PLC meeting.

The time when PLCs meet is also varied, with most schools having common planning times in the daily schedule for PLCs to do their work. And when PLCs do meet, they are characteristically focused on teaching and learning and refrain from divergent teacher talk that detracts from this focus. Teams use protocols routinely, aiding in their effort to collaborate in open and honest ways.

Principals are key players in making PLCs a priority at their schools. Their leadership is passive, and principals routinely lead by example as they facilitate their own PLC made up of the coaches. The prevailing attitude on the part of the principal, and one that trickles down to the entire faculty, is that PLCs are serious work that can and will make a difference for the students who are served by the school.