
Key Terms and Concepts in a PLC

action orientation: A predisposition to learn by doing; moving quickly to turn aspirations into actions and visions into realities. Members of PLCs understand that the most powerful learning always occurs in a context of taking action, and they value engagement and reflective experience as the most effective teachers.

adaptive challenges: Challenges for which the solution is not apparent; challenges that cause us to experiment, discover, adjust, and adapt (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). Adaptive challenges may also be described as second-order change.

attainable goals: Goals perceived as achievable by those who set them. Attainable goals are intended to document incremental progress and build momentum and self-efficacy through short-term wins.

balanced assessment: An assessment strategy that recognizes no single assessment yields the comprehensive results necessary to inform and improve practice and foster school and system accountability; therefore, balanced assessments utilize multiple measures of student achievement including formative assessments *for* learning and summative assessments *of* learning. Balanced assessment also refers to using different types of formative assessments based upon the knowledge and/or skills students are called upon to demonstrate. Rather than relying exclusively on one kind of assessment, schools and teams develop multiple ways for students to demonstrate proficiency.

building shared knowledge: Learning together. When members of PLCs are called upon to resolve an issue or make a decision, they consistently attempt to learn together by clarifying questions and accessing the same information and knowledge base. Members of a PLC, by definition, will *learn* together.

capacity building: Developing the collective ability—the dispositions, knowledge, skills, motivation, and resources—to act together to bring about positive change (Fullan, 2005a, p. 4).

collaboration: A *systematic* process in which people work together, *interdependently*, to analyze and *impact* professional practice in order to improve individual and collective results. In a PLC, collaboration focuses on the critical questions of learning: What is it we want each student to learn? How will we know when each student has learned it? How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning? How will we enrich and extend the learning for students who are proficient?

collective inquiry: The process of building shared knowledge by clarifying the questions that a group will explore together. In PLCs, collaborative teams engage in collective inquiry into both best practices regarding teaching and learning as well as the reality of the current practices and conditions in their schools or districts.

common formative assessment: An assessment typically created collaboratively by a team of teachers responsible for the same grade level or course. Common formative assessments are used frequently throughout the year to identify (1) individual students who need additional time and support for learning, (2) the teaching strategies most effective in helping students acquire the intended knowledge and skills, (3) program concerns—areas in which students generally are having difficulty achieving the intended standard—and (4) improvement goals for individual teachers and the team.



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community: A group linked by common interests. Whereas the term “organization” tends to emphasize structure and efficiency, “community” suggests shared purpose, mutual cooperation, and supportive relationships.

consensus: Consensus is achieved when (1) all points of view have been heard and (2) the will of the group is evident even to those who most oppose it.

continuous improvement process: The ongoing cycle of planning, doing, checking, and acting designed to improve results—constantly. In a PLC, this ongoing cycle includes gathering evidence of current levels of student learning, developing strategies and ideas to build on strengths and address weaknesses in that learning, implementing those strategies and ideas, analyzing the impact of the changes to discover what was effective and what was not, and applying the new knowledge in the next cycle of continuous improvement.

criterion-referenced assessment: An assessment used to determine if a student or group of students have met a specific standard or intended learning outcome (Ainsworth & Viegut, 2006).

crucial conversation: Dialogue in which “the stakes are high, opinions vary, and emotions run strong” (Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, & Switzler, 2002, p. 3).

curriculum leverage: The skills, knowledge, and dispositions that will assist the student in becoming proficient in other areas of the curriculum and other academic disciplines (Reeves, 2002).

data versus information: Data represent facts or figures that, standing alone, will not inform practice or lead to informed decisions. To transform data into information requires putting data in context, and this typically requires a basis of comparison.

dispersed leadership: Leadership that is widely distributed throughout a school rather than vested in an individual person or position. Emphasis is placed on developing the capacity of people throughout the school to assume leadership roles and to become “leaders of leaders.”

DRIP Syndrome (Data Rich/Information Poor): The problem of an abundance of data that does nothing to inform practice because it is not presented in context through the use of relevant comparisons.

essential learning: The critical skills, knowledge, and dispositions each student must acquire as a result of each course, grade level, and unit of instruction. Essential learning may also be referred to as essential outcomes or power standards.

first-order change: Innovation that is incremental, representing the next step on an established path and operating within existing paradigms. The change can be implemented by using the existing knowledge and skills of the staff. The goal of first-order change is to help us get better at what we are already doing (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005).

formative assessment: An assessment *for* learning used to advance and not merely monitor each student’s learning (Stiggins, 2002). Formative assessments are used to ensure any student who experiences difficulty reaching or exceeding proficiency is given additional time and support as well as additional opportunities to demonstrate his or her learning. Formative assessments are also used to help students monitor their own progress toward an intended standard of proficiency.

foundation of a professional learning community: PLCs rest upon a shared *mission* of high levels of learning for all students. In order to achieve that mission, educators create a common *vision* of the school they must create, develop *values* or *collective commitments* regarding what they will do to create such a school, and use *goals* as measurable milestones to monitor their progress.



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“Genius of And”: The ability to reject the “Tyranny of Or” and embrace paradox. Embracing the Genius of And allows an individual to avoid the choice between *A or B* and to choose both *A and B* at the same time (Collins & Porras, 1997). A commitment to simultaneous loose and tight leadership serves as an example of the Genius of And.

goals: Measurable milestones that can be used to assess progress in advancing toward a vision. Goals establish targets and timelines to answer the question, “What results do we seek, and how will we know we are making progress?”

guaranteed and viable curriculum: A curriculum that (1) gives students access to the same essential learning regardless of who is teaching the class *and* (2) can be taught in the time allotted (Marzano, 2003).

guiding coalition: An alliance of key members of an organization who are specifically charged to lead a change process through the predictable turmoil. Members of the alliance should have shared objectives and high levels of trust.

high expectations: The confident belief that all students can attain mastery of the essential learning and that the staff has the capability to help all students achieve that mastery. “High expectations for success will be judged, not only by the initial staff beliefs and behaviors, but also by the organization’s response when some students do not learn” (Lezotte, 1991, p. 4).

knowing-doing gap: The disconnect between knowledge and action, the mystery of why knowledge of what needs to be done so frequently fails to result in action or behavior consistent with that knowledge (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000).

Law of the Few: The ability of a small close-knit group of people to champion an idea or proposal until it reaches a tipping point and spreads like an epidemic throughout an organization (Gladwell, 2002).

learning: The acquisition of new knowledge or skills through ongoing action and perpetual curiosity. Members of a PLC engage in the ongoing study and constant reflective practice that characterize an organization committed to continuous improvement.

learning organization: “Organizations where people continually expand their capacities to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together” (Senge, 1990, p. 3).

mission: The fundamental purpose of an organization. Mission answers the question, “Why do we exist?”

moral purpose: “Acting with the intention of making a positive difference in the lives of employees, customers, and society as a whole” (Fullan, 2001, p. 3). Fullan lists a commitment to moral purpose as a critical element of effective leadership and contends leadership must be ultimately assessed by the extent to which it awakens and mobilizes the moral purpose of those within the organization.

norm-referenced assessment: An assessment designed to compare the performance of an individual or group with a larger “norm” group typically representing a national sample with a wide and diverse cross-section of students (Ainsworth & Viegut, 2006).

positive deviants: Individuals, schools, and districts “whose behavior and practices lead to solutions to problems that others in the group who have access to exactly the same resources have not yet been able to solve. . . . They provide demonstrable evidence that a solution exists within the community for the problem” (Jerry Sternin of Save the Children, quoted in Richardson, 2004).

power standard: The knowledge, skills, and dispositions that have *endurance*, *leverage*, and are essential in preparing students for *readiness* at the next level (Reeves, 2002); the most essential learning or outcomes.



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professional: Someone with expertise in a specialized field, an individual who has not only pursued advanced training to enter the field, but who is also expected to remain current in its evolving knowledge base.

professional development: A lifelong, collaborative learning process that nourishes the growth of individuals, teams, and the school through a daily job-embedded, learner-centered, focused approach (National Staff Development Council, 2001).

professional learning community (PLC): Educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. Professional learning communities operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous job-embedded learning for educators.

readiness for the next level of learning/prerequisite knowledge: The skills, knowledge, and dispositions essential for success in the next unit, course, or grade level (Reeves, 2002).

reciprocal accountability: “For every increment of performance we ask of educators, there is an equal responsibility to provide them with the capacity to meet that expectation” (Elmore, 2006, p. 93). For example, principals of professional learning communities recognize they have an obligation to provide staff with the resources, training, mentoring, and support to help them successfully accomplish what they have been asked to do.

results orientation: A focus on outcomes rather than inputs or intentions. In PLCs, members are committed to achieving desired results and are hungry for evidence that their efforts are producing the intended outcomes.

school culture: The assumptions, beliefs, values, and habits that constitute the norm for the school and guide the work of the educators within it.

school structure: The policies, procedures, rules, and hierarchical relationships within the school.

second-order change: Innovation that represents a dramatic departure from the expected and familiar. It is perceived as a break from the past, is inconsistent with existing paradigms, may seem to be at conflict with prevailing practices and norms, and will require the acquisition of new knowledge and new skills (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). Also called “disruptive change.”

simultaneous loose and tight leadership: A leadership concept in which leaders encourage autonomy and creativity (loose) within well-defined parameters and priorities that must be honored (tight). The concept has also been referred to as “directed empowerment” (Waterman, 1987) and a “culture of discipline with an ethic of entrepreneurship” (Collins, 2001, p. 124).

SMART goals: Goals that are Strategic and Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Results-oriented, and Timebound (Conzemius & O’Neill, 2005).

stretch goals: Goals intended to inspire, to capture the imagination of people within the organization, to stimulate creativity and innovation, and to serve as a unifying focal point of effort. Stretch goals are so ambitious that they typically cannot be achieved without significant changes in practice. Stretch goals are also referred to as BHAGs: Big, Hairy, Audacious Goals (Collins & Porras, 1997).

summative assessment: An assessment of learning (Stiggins, 2002) designed to provide a final measure to determine if learning goals have been met (Ainsworth & Viegut, 2006). Summative assessments yield a dichotomy: pass or fail, proficient or not proficient. Additional support is typically not forthcoming.

systematic intervention: A school-wide plan that ensures every student in every course or grade level will receive additional time and support



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for learning as soon as he or she experiences difficulty in acquiring essential knowledge and skills. The intervention occurs during the school day, and students are required rather than invited to devote the extra time and secure the extra support for learning.

systematic process: A specific effort to organize the combination of related parts into a coherent whole in a methodical, deliberate, and orderly way toward a particular aim.

teachable point of view: A succinct explanation of an organization's purpose and direction that can be illustrated through stories that engage others emotionally and intellectually (Tichy, 1997).

team: A group of people working *interdependently* to achieve a *common goal* for which members are held *mutually accountable*. Collaborative teams are the fundamental building blocks of PLCs.

team norms: "Ground rules or habits that govern a group" (Goleman, 2002, p. 173). In PLCs, norms represent protocols or commitments developed by each team to guide members in working together. Norms help team members clarify expectations regarding how they will work together to achieve their shared goals.

time management: The ability to organize and execute one's time around priorities (Covey, 1989).

"Tyranny of Or": "The rational view that cannot easily accept paradox, that cannot live with two seemingly contradictory forces at the same time. We must be A or B but not both" (Collins & Porras, 1997, p. 44).

values: The specific attitudes, behaviors, and commitments that must be demonstrated in order to advance the organization's vision. Articulated values answer the question, "How must we behave in order to make our shared vision a reality?"

REVISITING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES AT WORK

vision: A realistic, credible, attractive future for an organization. Vision answers the question, “What do we hope to become at some point in the future?”

