Your Professional Learning Community

Welcome to an adventure! If you are a teacher who is interested in not only developing your classroom repertoire but also increasing your students' achievement and motivation, you are in for a treat. Professional learning communities are a vehicle for connecting teacher practice and student outcomes, improving both. Formative assessment is an approach to assessment and instruction that increases both students' motivation and achievement. Before we launch into the logistics, the how-tos, and – to be honest – the work involved in professional learning communities, it's important to focus on this promise of adventure. This is why you are here. This is why you are joining a professional learning community. Weclome!

Definition/description of Professional Learning Community. A Professional Learning Community (PLC), as we will use the term in this workbook, means

A group of 4 to 6 teachers and/or administrators
That meets regularly
And works between meetings
To accomplish shared goals.

In this case, the shared goals should be something like

> *To increase teacher knowledge and skill in formative assessment, and*
> *To increase student motivation and achievement as a result.*

Let's look at the definition a piece at a time. **First, why 4 to 6 participants?** The number could be flexible, of course,

but it needs to be large enough so that the group brings a diversity of perspectives and experiences to the table and small enough so that specific discussions of each member's work can take place. If you can manage to have an even number of participants, colleagues can work in pairs between sessions, which has added benefits: it decreases the number of projects to be discussed at any one time and it increases the options available for working on the projects. For example, two teachers can try the same strategy in their classrooms, observe each other, and reflect on the strategy in the context of two different teachers and groups of students.

Why is it important to meet regularly and to work between meetings? PLCs are working groups. In them, teachers work collaboratively to reflect on practice. They examine evidence about the relation between teacher practices and student outcomes. This requires both meeting time for discussion and work between meetings to read informational pieces and reflect on them and to try things in the classroom and collect evidence about the results. Meeting without anything meaty to discuss is pointless. Reading and classroom undertakings without taking the time to reflect, share, and learn from them is likewise pointless. It takes both.

What can you expect to happen as a result of your PLC work? When PLCs function well, they accomplish more than just the specific teaching and learning goals the PLC set out to investigate. First and foremost, changes should improve teaching and learning for the particular students in their classroom. Results from learning communities in schools, according to McLaughlin and Talbert (2006, p. 5) include the following.

Teachers build and mange various kinds of knowledge:

knowledge about content and pedagogy and the skills to use this knowledge in practice.

Teachers and administrators develop a shared language and shared standards for practice and student outcomes. This is a bigger deal than you might think, as you will find when you and your colleagues begin to discuss what things mean in the course of your PLC work.

Teachers and administrators sustain vital aspects of school culture. Learning together becomes a school-wide value.

In your PLC, you will be building shared language and shared standards of practice in formative assessment. You will be developing a classroom and school climate in which mistakes and successes alike are opportunities to learn. You will be developing a classroom and school climate in which learning is more about increasing student understanding of a topic than about the good grades that result.

Recruiting

If you are reading this workbook, you may already have committed to becoming a member of a PLC investigating Formative Assessment. Where will you find others interested in such a commitment? Here are three strategies. Select the strategy (or strategies) that are most appropriate for your situation.

Ask people. Your school or district may already have groups that meet regularly. A smaller group within an existing group may decide they have a mutual interest in investigating formative assessment. Building principals and other district administrators are good sources of names. See if any of them are interested in joining a PLC investigating Formative Assessment, and

if they have suggestions for others you might contact. Work with administrators, as well, on PLC logistics. Administrators should be able to help you with needs for time, space, and other resources. They should know whether it is possible to arrange for release time or other contractual benefits for participation in the PLC and how to arrange those.

Make announcements and/or distribute flyers. Ask for time at a faculty meeting or other gathering to make an informational announcement and do recruiting. Prepare for that announcement by writing down the goal for the PLC experience, why it is important, what you expect participants to do during the PLC experience, and what you expect the benefits will be. Communicate your excitement and interest. Give as many details as you can and also stress that some of the details will be worked out collaboratively at the first meeting. Finally, distribute a handout with a summary of the information and a way for interested teachers and administrators to indicate that. An example is on page 7: use it or create your own. Such a handout can be distributed in school mailboxes to those who were not present at the meeting.

Hold an open house. Identify a time and place for an open-house style meeting to explore the PLC as an option. Invite people to the meeting using either of the methods above, and specify that it will be an informational meeting only. Use all or some of the materials from Session 1A to introduce the topic of Formative Assessment so people can make an informed decision about whether they would like to participate. Decide whether you will ask for a decision about participation at the end of the meeting or by a

certain time in the future, and make sure those who attend the open meeting know how they should indicate whether they would like to commit to participation.

YOU ARE INVITED!

To: Join a Professional Learning Community
Investigating Formative Assessment

A group of 4 to 6 studying and trying out formative assessment strategies in the classroom.

We will meet regularly, and work between meetings, with these goals:
To increase our knowledge and skill in formative assessment, and To increase student motivation and achievement as a result.

By:

When and Where: Our first meeting is

For additional information:

RSVP by:

Meeting Basics

Organizing your meeting should include attention to scheduling, attendance, roles, and ground rules.

Scheduling. How often will you meet, and where and when? Two recommended patterns are:

- **Once a month.** There are seven topics and session activities plus an evaluation and wrap-up, so you could meet once a month. That would allow you plenty of time in between to read, reflect, try things in your classroom, and collect student evidence.

- **Twice a month.** In once a month meetings, your group will not exhaust all there is to talk about under each topic and all the teacher reflections and student work there is to process. You might choose to meet twice a month (or every 2 weeks), using the first session of each month to review readings and do content-based activities and the second session to discuss reports of classroom activities and the student work that resulted.

Attendance. It would be wise to have an explicit expectation that all members commit to attending all sessions except, of course, for emergencies. This is important both for continuity of content and also for the creation of a group atmosphere that fosters open discussion.

Roles. Your group should specifically decide on a facilitator (or two) and should, at each meeting, assign any other cooperative role (for example, recorder) for the meeting in progress and any "homework" roles and responsibilities for the following meeting.

- Each group needs at least one **logistical facilitator** or coordinator who reminds members before each meeting, sets agendas, reserves space and sees to other logistics as needed, and collects any materials needed (for example, copies of readings).

- Each group also needs a **meeting facilitator**, who keeps meetings moving, monitors participation for adherence to ground rules, and the like. This meeting facilitator role may be performed by the same person who handles the logistics or by

another individual.

- Within various session activities, **leadership of discussion and provision of content should rotate**, and should be mutually agreed on before the next meeting. For example, if a group member commits to trying a particular formative assessment practice in her classroom, that person would be responsible for bringing and presenting the appropriate reflections and student work to the next meeting, reporting on what she did, calling on her partner/observer to explain what she saw, and so on. She would be responsible for bringing to the group the questions she wanted to discuss. Every group member should have such a responsibility at least once during the year.

- It is a good idea to have a **recorder** to take notes on the discussion. This role can be permanent or can rotate, depending on the wishes of your group.

Ground rules. Have a discussion at the beginning of the first meeting about ground rules for group meetings. Try for general expectations that will help build an open and inquiry-oriented community, not narrow "rules." Your group will decide on its own ground rules, but we urge you to consider these as possibilities. They have been found to be characteristics of successful professional learning communities (Easton, 2008; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006):

Develop an ethic of sharing. There should be plenty of room for everyone. PLCs are not a zero-sum game where if one person gets time, energy, or commitment another loses it. Develop an ethic of commitment, as

well, sharing your time, energy and resources for the good of the group. Everyone (including you) will benefit.

It is OK to question. Asking why, asking for evidence ("how do you know that?"), and the like are not personal challenges. Questioning is the hallmark of an inquiry approach. There is no learning without wondering.

Having others in your classroom is OK. Peer observation will give you a "second pair of eyes" look at what you are doing. Peer observation will help verify your successes and provide feedback for practices that could be improved. Peer observation should be done in a non-judgmental fashion.

Do not say "I already do that" as a first response. For example, teachers often say they already share their learning targets with students, or give clear feedback, and the like. It is a matter of inquiry to what extent students do understand learning targets and feedback, to what extent such practices can be improved or more tailored to specific student needs. The first response stance, to any topic, should be "Let's see what we can find out about that."

Creating Effective Agendas

Most meetings will have an agenda something like the following. The first meeting agenda (see Sessions 1A and 1B below) will be a bit different. Each meeting should end with setting the agenda for the next meeting and a "What did I learn today?" wrap-up.

Sample Meeting Agenda

Introduction (facilitator responsible)
- Review of roles and expectations (as needed)
- Review agenda for the day

Previous Topic Homework
- Discussion of readings (all responsible)
- Sharing and reflecting on classroom experiences and reviewing student more responsible for preparing)

New Topic
- Introduction of new topic (facilitator responsible)
- Shared Language: Discussion of a New Term (facilitator leads, optional Session 1A)
- Identify what to read and reflect on before next meeting
- Make commitments about classroom activities all will try and who will be for presenting at the next meeting
- If pairs are not permanent features of your group, identify who will work classroom trials

Wrap-up What did I learn? (facilitator leads)

POSSIBLE PROJECT STEPS
<u>Initiating the Project</u>

Essential Questions	**Steps**	**Results/Outcomes**
1. Who will work on this team? How can we get the right people involved? How many should we have? Who else should be involved?	Let all educators who should be involved know about the work – at their own meetings; invite them to participate. Always ask, "Who else should be a part of this work?" Help people understand the compelling aspects of the work – why it's important. Provide a job description for potential participation. Establish a policy for participation (e.g., is it OK to have substitutes?). Consider a variety of participation possibilities (i.e., standing committee and de facto participants). Consider having a core team and an advisory – so people can play different roles and more can be involved and knowledgeable about the work. Ensure that leadership from each relevant area (school, department) is involved. Ensure that each grade level is represented, if that's important.	The right people who are committed to the work and have the energy to pursue it; they provide a variety of viewpoints and bring a variety of talents, experiences, and skills. Consistent attendance at meetings. Good communication with those who do not participate in meetings but need to know what's going on.

	Invite others who may be affected by (or may affect) the work: counselors, library media specialists, principals and assistant principals. Consider making a list of people who do not want to be active participants; they just want to know what's going on. Put them on an email list and send out periodic announcements about what your core team is doing.	
2. How can we get support for the work?	Identify support needed – e.g., acknowledgement, PR, released time, funds, waivers. Make sure support comes from the highest position(s) possible (authority) – as well as for those who are going to be affected by (and also affect) the work. Identify the people who can provide needed support. Prepare a presentation for them including rationale for the work. Be specific about type of support needed: what? How much? How long?	Verbal and written support for the project. Concrete support, as needed. Evidence of support apparent to others. Appropriate action if something seems to be blocking the work.
3. How will we decide who leads the team? How can we share leadership	Determine the types of leadership needed (see Assets list attached). Decide which team members are able to provide the types of leadership needed as the work	Leadership that is shared so that no one person bears the entire leadership burden. Consistency in leadership so that it is seamless over time and across responsibilities.

	proceeds. Decide how leadership can be shared. Make sure the leader(s) see their role as stewardship for the work – not as the one who does everything and knows everything.	No gaps in leadership that jeopardize the project. Opportunity for everyone to be a leader. A leader (or leaders) who makes it possible for everyone to do their best work. No need for fame or fortune.
4. How will we determine how often, when and where to meet?	Begin with expected results. Plan backwards in terms of how to achieve these results. Do a task analysis. Determine the number of meetings needed to accomplish the tasks and achieve results. Decide who needs to be involved in each meeting (some may not require everybody). Decide how to maintain consistency and momentum when everyone is not involved. Let those involved decide when and where to meet; accept the fact that not everyone every time will be able to participate. Publish meeting logistics broadly – so anyone can come. Publish meeting dates as far out as possible.	Meetings are sufficient for accomplishing the work. Meetings feel productive ("We really got a lot done today!"). Meetings involve those who need to be there, including – at times – all participants in the work. Meeting logistics suit those who will be involved – as much as possible. Attendance is sufficient for getting things done. Attendance does not drop off significantly, although it can fluctuate some. Momentum is maintained through regular meetings that everyone attends as well as communication about events at meetings that are not attended by everyone.

	Assure those who are not required to attend that they will get succinct notes about meeting procedures.	
5. How will we communicate what we are doing and what we are learning?	Determine who needs to know what. Ask who else needs to know. Determine the best ways to reach those who need to know. Consider blogs, announcements at faculty meetings, voicemail, email, posters, memos. Focus as much on learning as on the business of the group.	People within the project group are satisfied with the communication. People outside the project group are satisfied with the communication. People both within and outside the work group are able to respond knowledgeably about what the group is doing. People both within and outside the work group know what is being learned.
6. How will we know what we need to do?	Identify desired results. Analyze results. What is needed in order to accomplish results? Brainstorm a list of essential actions. Push thinking by asking, "What else needs to happen for us to accomplish this result?" Use sticky notes to capture essential actions. Group related essential actions – if any. Place essential actions in order. Work backwards from the date the result must be accomplished to determine dates essential actions need	Analysis of desired results. Appropriate essential actions – at a level that can be accomplished (i.e., specific enough that everyone knows what "it looks like" when an essential action has been completed). Public display of essential actions as well as deadlines, talent and other notes that ensure success. Regular updates on completion of essential actions leading to accomplishment of desired results.

	to be accomplished. Decide "talent" – who will lead and who will help. Post everything on butcher paper where the group regularly meets so that updates can be noted as the work progresses.	
7. How will we know we are making progress?	Complete steps for #6 above. Benchmark goals – what will you have accomplished one month out, three months, nine months, etc? At each meeting note on the butcher paper what has been accomplished in terms of essential actions. Celebrate even small successes – actions that have been started, for example. Leave each meeting with a list of the next actions to be taken.	A chart showing progress on each desired result, according to essential actions. Communication with everyone involved in terms of what has been done – and what has been learned. (See #5 above.) Regular celebrations.
8. How will we keep the momentum going?	Ask those who are not involved in the project to coach the team. Partner with other districts or schools or entities doing the same work. Plan on meetings during which you report on your progress and get feedback. . . and learn from what others have done and give them feedback. Arrange times for these people to hear a report	Attendance at meetings does not decrease – in fact, more people express interest in what the group is doing. Participants in the work express positive feelings about the work they are doing (although there will, of course, be 'down' times). People are eager to take on the next tasks.

	about what's happening, what's gotten stuck, and what's planned. Plan for coaches to give feedback to the team. Make sure each meeting includes the steps in #7, recording and celebrating progress. Make sure that progress in learning and doing is announced in some way – such as at faculty meetings and on blogs. Invite others to join the celebrations for major completion of essential actions.	

LEADERSHIP ASSETS OF THE GROUP

Douglas Reeves (2006) is very clear. No one person can perform all the various leadership functions alone. It takes a group ("It takes a village."). Here are the various functions that leaders must perform, together.

Visionary Leadership

Relational Leadership

Systems Leadership

Reflective Leadership

Collaborative Leadership

Analytical Leadership

Communicative Leadership