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Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning

Communities at Work® (Third Edition, Canadian Version)

By Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker, Thomas W. Many, and Mike Mattos

With Karen Power

Study Guide

This study guide is a companion to the book *Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work®* (Third Edition, Canadian Version) by Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker, Thomas W. Many, and Mike Mattos with contributions by Karen Power. *Learning by Doing* provides comprehensive guidance that can help educators overcome the challenges they may face as they turn their schools into professional learning communities (PLCs).

This guide is arranged by chapter, enabling readers to either work their way through the entire book or focus on the specific topics addressed in a particular chapter. It can be used by individuals, small groups, or an entire faculty to identify key points, raise questions for consideration, assess conditions in a particular school or district, and suggest steps that might be taken to promote a healthy school culture.

We thank you for your interest in this book, and we hope this guide is a useful tool in your efforts to create a healthy culture in your school or district.

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Chapter 1

A Guide to Action for Professional Learning Communities at Work

1. The authors quote Mike Schmoker (2004) as observing, “Clarity precedes competence” (p. 85). As you begin to clarify the term *professional learning community*, think of each of these words: *professional*, *learning*, and *community*. How would you define each of these terms? More specifically, what behaviors would one exhibit if one behaved in a professional manner? What behaviors would one exhibit if one focused on continuous learning and conducted one’s work as part of a community?
2. Assume your school is implementing the PLC concept and a local newspaper reporter is interviewing you for a story. How would you respond if the reporter asked you, “Exactly what is a professional learning community?” Reflect on how others in your school or district might respond to this question.
3. The very essence of a learning community is a focus on and a commitment to the learning of each student. If visitors came to your school for the first time, what behaviors would they observe that would indicate learning was indeed the central, overriding purpose of the school?

4. One of the major differences between a more traditional school and a PLC school is a PLC shifts from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning. If your school adopted learning as its fundamental purpose, what questions would teachers, staff, and administrators ask? What questions would the community as a whole ask of itself?
5. Adults in a learning community are continually learning. How does your school promote learning for the adults who work there?
6. Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert Sutton (2000) argue that most organizations already know what is required to be successful but fail to act. What are some factors that contribute to a school administration or staff's failure to implement what we know will help all students learn at high levels? What are some ways your school's staff or administration has attempted to overcome these barriers?
7. It is critical that faculty and staff develop a deep, rich understanding of the PLC process and practices. How has your district or school approached the task of ensuring that everyone has gained a common understanding and a common vocabulary? In spite of these efforts, do faculty and staff remain who have only a cursory understanding of the PLC process? If so, what steps need to be taken to make sure everyone has a deep and accurate understanding of the PLC process and related practices?

8. Has your school conducted a detailed assessment of the current reality of its state of student learning levels? If so, what strengths were revealed? What areas need the most immediate attention? If your school has not assessed its current reality, what would need to be done to complete such an assessment?

9. Michael Fullan (2005) has observed that “terms travel easily . . . but the meaning of the underlying concepts does not” (p. 67). How precise is the understanding of important PLC terms in your school? How consistently are terms defined? How much time is spent developing a deep, rich understanding of key terms and concepts?

Chapter 2

Defining a Clear and Compelling Purpose

1. In the case study, Principal Elizabeth Nowlan set out to build a PLC culture in her school by developing a new school mission statement. What are the limitations of relying on a mission statement to develop or change a school's culture? How has your school gone beyond writing a mission statement to embed learning as the core purpose in the culture of your school?
2. The authors make the case that developing a guiding coalition is a powerful strategy in the change process. Principal Nowlan would have benefited from working through issues with a small group of key staff and securing them as allies before engaging the entire faculty. Who would be some of the key faculty to recruit for a guiding coalition in your school?
3. The authors point out that the biggest process mistake the principal made was her failure to build shared knowledge among her staff. What are two or three major issues that need to be addressed in your school? What are some ways the faculty could engage in building shared knowledge around these issues? What resources could be made available to assist the faculty in building shared knowledge?

4. The authors articulate a number of actions the principal and staff in the case study could have taken to convey their commitment to improving their school. Compare the authors' suggestions with actions your school has taken to convey a commitment to improving your school. Were the effects of your school's improvement actions monitored? If so, how effective have these actions been? What additional actions need to be taken?
5. School staff need to develop collective commitments that each staff member must honor if the PLC the staff has envisioned is to become a reality. What are some key commitments that would need to be made for your school to function as a PLC? Why do you feel the authors emphasize these commitments should be stated as behaviors rather than beliefs?
6. Reflect on this statement: "When something is truly a priority in an organization, people do not hope it happens; they develop and implement systematic plans to ensure that it happens" (page 35). What gets planned for in your school?
7. It has been said that what gets monitored gets done. Describe how priorities are monitored and how results are shared with the staff.
8. Has your school involved staff in setting short-term goals that, if achieved, would move the school toward the agreed-upon vision? If your school accomplished every improvement goal, what would be the impact on student learning?

9. The authors describe a number of “dangerous detours” school leaders might encounter while articulating a clear and compelling purpose. Have you experienced any of these? If so, what have you done to get back on track and continue to move forward? What have you personally learned as your school has encountered various dangerous detours?

Chapter 3

Building the Collaborative Culture of a Professional Learning Community

1. In the case study, Principal Randy Kerr took steps to promote a collaborative culture in his school. Why is creating a collaborative culture the right work? In what ways does your school encourage collaboration?
2. Principal Kerr didn't see a difference in student achievement despite embedding the work of collaborative teams into the school. What did the teams fail to do? If you were advising Principal Kerr, what advice would you give to him? Have your collaborative teams made the shift from meeting because of compliance to understanding the *why* of the PLC process?
3. What is your understanding of the concept of reciprocal accountability? How effectively has that concept been utilized in your school or district to guide the work of teams? In what ways could the concept be better employed to enhance team effectiveness?
4. How are teams organized in your school—by grade level, department, course, discipline, or other classifications? What is the underlying rationale for your school's team structure?

5. What suggestions do the authors offer for providing collaboration opportunities for teachers who are the only teachers in a particular grade level or content area in a school?
6. Educators frequently identify time constraints as the major barrier to collaboration. What are some of the suggestions found in this chapter for creating collaborative time?
7. This chapter contains a research-based list of characteristics of teams that demonstrate high emotional intelligence (pages 69–70). Do teams in your school reflect these characteristics? Which of these characteristics are strongest displayed, and which seem to be the weakest?
8. If you were asked why schools should organize into collaborative teams, what response would you give? What evidence could you cite in your response? Does any research support the contention that the best way to organize a school is by having individual teachers work in isolation? What response would you give to a teacher who says he or she is being asked to sacrifice content time for collaborative time?
9. React to Michael Fullan’s (2001) statement that “collaborative cultures, which by definition have close relationships, are indeed powerful, but unless they are focusing on the right things they may end up being powerfully wrong” (p. 67). What has been your experience when working on collaborative teams? Have your teams focused on the “right things”? What do you consider the right things?

Chapter 4

Creating a Results Orientation in a Professional Learning Community

1. In the case study, Principal Greg Kushnir explained how a focus on learning, collaboration, and results will support teachers in achieving their collective mission of high levels of learning for all. Has your school made the shift from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning? What evidence can you cite that such a shift has, in fact, taken place?
2. The authors draw attention to the minimal impact strategic planning has on learning. Examine the planning efforts in your district. How aligned is the goal-setting process among the board of education, central office, building administration, and classroom teachers?
3. Why should educators focus on ensuring each collaborative team in every school is working toward SMART goals that are specifically linked to school and district goals?
4. To what degree do your team's goals meet this chapter's SMART goals standards? Are your goals strategic and specific, measurable, attainable, results oriented, and time bound?

5. The authors suggest some important distinctions between different kinds of goals. What has your school done to identify the difference between a stretch goal (at the district level) and an attainable goal (at the team level)?
6. The authors recommend that teams create specific learning goals. To what degree has this been done in your school? How did you develop these goals? Have teams developed short-term goals that can serve as benchmarks of progress, as well as a few stretch goals? Have plans been developed to monitor each team's goals? How is this accomplished?
7. What does it mean for a PLC to shift a school's focus from intentions or activities to results? What are some things your school has done to develop a results orientation?
8. The authors note that key strategies for creating a results orientation throughout a district are for leaders to identify a limited number of very focused goals and use well-designed processes to drive those goals. To what extent have focused learning goals been developed in your school or district? What effect has focused learning goals had on individual classrooms?
9. It has been argued that a school can only create a results orientation by focusing on results rather than activities. Consider the following questions, and answer each in the context of your school.

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- a. How will we measure the achievement of goals? What are some appropriate indicators, measures, and targets for SMART goals?
- b. What process do we have in place to link SMART goals written at the individual, team, and building levels to the district's stretch goals?
- c. What process do we have in place to regularly monitor the progress of individual, team, building, and district goals? How frequently is the progress reviewed at the team, building, and district levels?

Chapter 5

Establishing a Focus on Learning

1. In the case study, the authors describe how the provincial education department resisted a district's attempts to clarify the most essential learnings for students. Has this happened in your district? Why do individuals at the provincial level as well as teachers sometimes resist a school's or district's clarification of essential outcomes? Identify sources of resistance, and reflect on ways to respond.
2. The authors urge readers to avoid the "Tyranny of Or" and embrace the "Genius of And." How could a district apply the Genius of And to the need for staff ownership of particular outcomes and consistency of curriculum across the district?
3. If learning is the fundamental purpose of a school, the next obvious question is "Learn what?" To what degree have collaborative teams examined, clarified, prioritized, and made public the essential outcomes for every subject, grade, course, and unit? Why would this endeavor be necessary if the province, territory, or district has already provided schools with curriculum guides?

4. In your own words, state the six steps that Superintendent Karen Power and her faculty should take to participate in a process of collective inquiry. Which of these steps do you think would be the hardest for your faculty to adopt, and why is this the case?
5. This chapter emphasizes the need to reduce curriculum content. What are the key points the authors make? Do you agree? Have you undertaken a process to reduce content in your school's curriculum?
6. On page 111, the authors describe how teachers in Superintendent Power's district can clarify student learning outcomes by asking teams to reach agreement regarding what each outcome, if mastered, would look like in terms of student work. What would be the advantages of teams collaboratively addressing this question and translating the learning targets into student-friendly "I can" statements?
7. Part two of this chapter describes a number of strategies for establishing a focus on learning by developing a guaranteed and viable curriculum. How would you respond if a few teachers on staff indicated they simply did not want to participate in such strategies?
8. After reading the section "Dangerous Detours and Seductive Shortcuts," reflect on the efforts your school or district has made to avoid or overcome similar bumps in the road.

Chapter 6

Creating Team-Developed Common Formative Assessments

1. How are summative assessments different from formative assessments? Describe a case in your classroom in which you would use a formative assessment and a case in which you would use a summative assessment, and define what each of these assessments would entail.
2. What two things do all protocols accomplish? Consider the two sample six-step protocols in this chapter, which are taken from Harvard's Project Zero and Adlai E. Stevenson High School. Which protocol do you prefer, and why is this the case?
3. Consider the definitions for deeper learning provided in this chapter. In your own words, define *deeper learning*.
4. Visit the websites that educators can use to create better quality assessments that are listed in this chapter. Which of these websites seems most helpful to you, and what do you find beneficial on the website?
5. The authors note, "One of the most powerful, high-leverage strategies for improving student learning available to schools is the creation of frequent, high-quality common

formative assessments by teachers who are working collaboratively to help a group of students acquire agreed-on knowledge and skills” (page 132). What would be an appropriate response to teachers who ask why collaboratively developed common assessments are important? What are some potential barriers to creating common assessments, and how could you overcome them?

6. The authors suggest that common, team-developed formative assessments are “so powerful [in school improvement] that no teacher team should be allowed to opt out of creating them” (page 136). What are the implications of this statement for those who have different roles within the school? Specifically, consider the following: What is the role of the teacher (or teacher teams) in developing a system of high-quality common assessments? What is the role of the principal? What is the role of the district office?
7. List the seven reasons why school leaders must remain mindful that common, team-made formative assessments should always be included in their assessment practices, and briefly describe why each of these reasons is important.
8. What two levers can persuade veteran educators to change their practice? Why do you think that these are the most impactful ways to talk to veteran teachers about instituting changes?

Chapter 7

Responding When Some Students Don't Learn

1. In the case study, it became obvious to Principal Harold Freiter that the traditional system of pull-out wasn't working for all students and resulted in profound inequities. Does your school implement the pull-out system? What are some different intervention systems that can better meet the needs of all students?
2. Think about the observation that St. Andrews School was playing an “educational lottery” with students’ lives—“whether or not a student’s needs were being met depended on the pull-out program to which he or she was assigned” (page 150). Could the same be said of your school? Can you cite examples to support your answer?
3. If you were asked to deliver an address on the topic of helping all students learn, how would you describe your school’s systematic plan of intervention to provide students with additional time and support when they struggle with their learning? Do you think all teachers in your school would provide a similar description? What would be the advantages of developing a written systematic plan of intervention that is widely distributed?

4. In part two of this chapter, the authors make the case that schools must develop systematic plans to provide students with additional time and support during the school day. What do the authors mean by *systematic*? Does your school have such a plan? Is your school plan timely, ensuring students get help when they first experience difficulty? And is it directive rather than invitational?
5. The authors suggest that Principal Freiter might develop an intervention plan for supporting student learning by first creating a process through which the staff examines the “brutal facts” of their current situation and then studies best practices for responding to students who are experiencing difficulty in their learning. Is this generally how issues are addressed in your school? What are the advantages and disadvantages of this process of collective learning?
6. The authors note that when schools have successfully created systematic interventions to provide additional time and support for students using existing resources, the staff must agree to modify the schedule and assume new roles and responsibilities. Suppose a teacher made the following observation: “We all want to provide additional time and support for students. It’s just that our schedule won’t allow it! We don’t have enough instructional time to cover all the material we are required to cover.” How would you respond to this teacher’s concerns?

7. This chapter observes, “Individual teachers working in isolation as they attempt to help all of their students achieve at high levels will eventually be overwhelmed by the tension between covering the content and responding to the diverse needs of their students in a fixed amount of time with virtually no external support” (page 162). Do you agree with this observation? How do you think teachers typically respond to this tension?

8. React to the following statement: “It is disingenuous for any school to claim its purpose is to help all students learn at high levels and then fail to create a system of intervention to give struggling learners additional time and support for learning” (page 163).

Chapter 8

Hiring, Orienting, and Retaining New Staff

1. What steps did Superintendent Yvonne Careen take to develop a deeply embedded PLC culture in her district? Has your district ensured everyone within your district uses a common language and has the same PLC training? What evidence can you cite to support your answer?
2. In the case study, Superintendent Careen recognized hiring new staff members often disrupts the flow of the collaborative processes at her schools. What advice would you share with Superintendent Careen for interviewing new staff? How might she improve her hiring process?
3. What five characteristics should a coordinated induction system for new teachers have? Which of these characteristics does your school orientation program best incorporate, and in which of these areas does your program require the most work? How could your program better include these characteristics?
4. What are stay interviews? What questions do you think a principal should ask in meeting with key staff members individually to discuss their concerns and plan for their job enrichment?

5. In what ways does teacher turnover influence student achievement? In what school environments are teacher turnover rates the highest, and why is this the case? How does this teacher turnover impact how districts and schools must allocate their resources?
6. Why does school leadership need to notice, recognize, and appreciate veteran teachers' and staff members' efforts? What steps does your school currently take to re-recruit veteran employees and acknowledge their achievements? How could your school improve in the areas of re-recruitment and recognition?
7. Consider the tips provided for selecting and retaining staff. Which of these tips do you find most important? Why is this the case?

Chapter 9

Addressing Conflict and Celebrating in a Professional Learning Community

1. If getting everyone on board is the criterion for reaching consensus in your school, how many faculty members would it require to block a new initiative from being undertaken? What would be the advantage of reaching a working definition of consensus prior to engaging faculty in discussions about possible changes or new initiatives?
2. In the case study, Principal Maxine Hill attempted to establish a PLC culture in her new school but failed to develop a common understanding and met resistance. After reflecting on this chapter, what should Principal Hill have focused on? What approach do the authors recommend for impacting someone's attitude?
3. Principal Hill knew she needed to build consensus yet developed no clear definition of consensus. What do you think an appropriate definition of consensus should be, and why is this the case?
4. One of the most important ways a school's core values are reinforced is through thoughtful, professional confrontation. Educators must be prepared to confront those who act contrary to the school's priorities and the staff's collective commitments. What behaviors get confronted in your school? What would it take for someone to point out to

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a staff member that his or her behavior was incongruent with the shared values of the school?

5. Successful teams know how to deal with conflict and realize that conflict is an important aspect of developing better practices. How is conflict resolved on your team? How is it resolved at your school?
6. Think of a professional decision that you recently were involved in making. Did the decision-making process create winners and losers? If consensus was reached, how was it accomplished?
7. Consider the following statement: “If leaders are unwilling to deal with resisters, they are left to improve their school one retirement at a time.” Do you agree or disagree? Why?
8. What guidelines do the authors offer for making celebration an important element in your school? What is your reaction to their emphasis on celebration and the specific strategies they suggest to use celebration in ways that will shape the culture of the school?

Chapter 10

Implementing the PLC Process Districtwide

1. In your district, what systems are in place to monitor the implementation of your PLC initiative?
2. In the case study, Director Shannon Aikman saw uneven results even though she felt the leadership team had done the right work. Why was this so? Identify three things she did well and three things you would recommend she do differently.
3. Consider the marked differences listed in this chapter in how high-leverage districts and low-leverage districts use collaborative time. What can you learn from these points in effectively using collaborative time in your school?
4. In your own words, define the “irrefutable law of initiative fatigue” (Reeves, 2004, p. 59). How have you experienced this fatigue in your school or seen others in the school display signs of this fatigue? How do effective superintendents avoid initiative fatigue?
5. Why can the frequent shuffling of principals and school leaders negatively impact school improvement initiatives? Have routine rotations of leaders impacted your school or been

avoided at your school? How do you think your school's level of stability in maintaining its leadership has impacted the school's improvement and students' achievement?

6. The authors make the point that it is important to clarify and create agreement around common terminology. Specifically, what efforts has your district made to clarify terminology? Have these efforts been effective? What else could be done to create agreement around common terminology?
7. What steps have been taken to clarify the specific behaviors that faculty and staff must exhibit in order to move schools toward the ideal they want to create? How are these expected behaviors communicated and monitored? How have these expected behaviors affected district culture?
8. The authors frequently refer to the importance of the concept of reciprocal accountability. What rights and obligations does this concept imply for district leadership and school personnel? Are the expectations for principals and teachers clear? Are the resources needed to successfully meet those expectations available? If so, are they utilized effectively?
9. The key to district improvement is “doing” rather than simply “knowing.” What has been done to build shared knowledge around specifically what needs to be done to improve student learning in schools throughout your district?