

Unclutter Your Team's Data Conversations

By Thomas W. Many

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"Whatever method you choose to organize your data, it needs to be done with intent and purpose."

—Owen Willis

Analyzing data is an important responsibility of teams in a PLC. Consultants Laura Lipton and Bruce Wellman (2012) note, "High performing teams systematically collect and use data to drive cycles of problem solving, planning, action, and reflection to both improve their own collaborative practices and improve instruction that makes a difference in student learning" (p. 3).

To collect and use data well, teachers often seek out advice regarding the best ways to organize data from common assessments or samples of student work. It is important to get this right because data that are confusing, convoluted, or overly complicated contribute to the kind of informational clutter that can overwhelm teachers and lead to frustration on the part of collaborative teams.

According to former special education teacher and data analysis expert Owen Willis (2016), "Data clutter can prevent teams, schools and districts from fully accessing the student data they have spent countless hours and dollars collecting." More important, Willis (2016) notes, "It [data clutter] can also waste a significant amount of teacher time that could be better spent planning or delivering instruction." Instead of distributing complicated spreadsheets and cluttered printouts that erode a team's commitment to using data, Lipton and Wellman (2012) advocate for "well-crafted data displays" that help "clarify and communicate often complex or abstract information" (p. 65). They point out that a thoughtful and well-designed approach to organizing data can "make different data types more accessible to group work" (p. 66).

"Good assessments provide a tremendous amount of raw data, but great analysis is impossible unless that data is recorded in a readily useable form."

—Paul Bambrick-Santoyo

Data conversations are structured group conversations that help teachers understand, develop, and work with data through a thoughtful, reflective process. The easiest way to eliminate the possibility that clutter will negatively impact the effectiveness of data conversations is to adopt a standardized approach to organize and display results.

TAADA Process

Kim Bailey developed a practical way of organizing data that helps unclutter data conversations: the TAADA framework. TAADA (turn it around, arrange it, analyze it, discuss it, and act on it) can be a useful tool to teacher teams (K. Bailey, personal communication, 2016). The steps of Bailey's TAADA framework are described in the following paragraphs.

T: Turn It Around

Timeliness is critical to productive data conversations. Old data are stale data, and nothing is worse than working with data past their expiration date. There are many resources, both human and technological, that allow teams to access their data less than forty-eight hours after

administering an assessment. It's clear that to be a resource teachers use to drive instructional decisions, assessment data must be current and reflective of ongoing instruction. This requires the principal and teacher leaders, with the support of central office administrators, to make a commitment to return data to teams in a timely manner.

A: Arrange It

Schools and districts can promote the regular use of data by creating systems that reduce or eliminate clutter. Data are most beneficial when arranged in ways that allow teams to look at individual student performance at the target level. While teams may approach this important task in different ways, the most effective way to arrange data is by target, by teacher, and by student.

A: Analyze It

Teams engage in a two-step process to analyze data. The first step begins at the macro level with teams taking a big-picture overview of the data and looking for trends and patterns. Teachers probe for answers to questions like, "Which were the highest- and lowest-performing targets?" and "Were there any common misconceptions between classes of students or different groups of students?"

In the second step of the analysis process, teachers dig deeper and examine the data at the micro level and seek to understand how to improve teaching and learning. The team works to identify which individual students require additional time and support and which specific learning targets will need more attention. Teachers also reflect on their instructional practice and identify which instructional strategies or parts of the unit they need to retain, refine, or replace.

D: Discuss It

This step is the heart of productive data conversations; it is where teachers make meaning of their practice. By this point in the data conversation, the discussion has transitioned from problem finding to problem solving, and the team has converted the raw data into information that becomes the knowledge and wisdom teachers use to develop their action plans.

This step is also when teams benefit most from the use of protocols. The regular use of protocols creates a safe, judgment-free environment where teachers can publicly discuss the data, reflect on the results, and make collective decisions about what needs to happen next to ensure high levels of learning for all.

A: Act on It

The final step is to take action on what the team has learned during the data conversation. Teams focus on responding to PLC critical questions three and four—"How will we respond when students do not learn?" and "How will we extend the learning of those students who are already proficient?" (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, Many, & Mattos, 2016, p. 36) by intentionally leveraging their schoolwide pyramid of interventions. Teachers reach consensus on what needs to be done to ensure students master the essential outcomes for each unit, and then take action.

Data conversations provide teams with opportunities to make meaning of their practice and inform instructional decision making. The key to making the best use of data is to treat assessments as opportunities to learn. It is also important to reduce clutter because well-organized data increase the chances teachers will engage in productive data conversations and learn more about their students, their teaching, and potential areas for improvement.

"Data provides hints, not answers. But when brought together with context and conversation, data can become actionable insights that translate into powerful changes for students."

—Leo Bialis-White, 2016

The term *data conversation* suggests some level of dialogue or discussion occurs among colleagues to turn the results of common assessments or samples of student work into actions that improve student learning. As Bialis-White (2016) writes, “It’s not about the data, it’s what you decide to do with it.”

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