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GTA PNC Capacity Building Project: What Are We Learning About Facilitating Impactful Professional Learning Communities?

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The Toronto Region PNC has engaged in a series of projects which has included building the capacity of the facilitator as a key component of going to scale with improvement. More specifically, building the understanding of what facilitation *entails* – rather than the facilitation *role* – has framed an important capacity building agenda for the PNC. Most boards are using the concept of the professional learning community (PLC) as the locus for the requisite professional learning in some kind of way. Professional learning communities, in theory, exist to create the conditions by which evidence-driven inquiry opportunities challenge existing thinking and practice. This is a necessary enabler of the focused professional learning that is the foundation of high quality classroom practice that, in turn, is the most powerful predictor of student learning and achievement.

PLCs exist at multiple levels; they can be within or across schools and they can involve different kinds of people. The proliferation of PLCs on the education landscape has far outpaced the associated research base in relation to their effectiveness as venues for actually changing practice that will impact on student achievement. What little research we do have, however, suggests that for the most part PLCs are not impactful because they don't effectively create the conditions for the kind of focused professional learning that we are talking about here. This conclusion is well-summarized by Supovitz in his book, *The Case for District Based Reform* (2006, p.178):

The power of the idea of a PLC is that members of the group... engage together in challenges of practice so that their understanding of those challenges grows deeper and is more unified. Through their investigations, proposed solutions emerge that are then tested to see if they help... Through such a repeated process, practice grows more sophisticated and powerful and the group develops a tighter sense of camaraderie and common purpose. As a result, they can construct common understanding, share knowledge and experience, and develop common goals. This form of professional learning communities was largely absent from the district, and the examples [school practitioners] did provide were too diffused and unfocused to have a strong influence on their practice. Activities like book talks and in-school professional development sessions were too sparse and diffused to fulfill the particular goals promised by PLCs.

This is why intentional facilitation is essential. The research reported here has worked to explicitly unpack the nature of the facilitation role in creating, supporting, and sustaining

impactful PLCs. It answers the question, what can we learn about facilitating impactful professional learning in collaborative settings?

Conceptual Framework

This project was guided by a robust and well-researched theory of action that suggests that student learning and achievement is influenced by the quality of classroom practice. And, that the quality of classroom practice is, in turn, influenced by focused professional learning on the part of professionals. (See Katz, Earl, and Ben Jaafar, 2009 for details¹). Teachers will not make real changes in practice in areas in which they don't change their *understanding*. Impactful PLCs create the conditions whereby professionals engage in focused collaborative inquiry (which centres on the use of evidence) in order to deepen understanding. Thus, student achievement rests on a foundation of teacher practice which, in turn, rests on a foundation of professional learning. The latter is a "leading indicator" of student achievement and, as such, is a high leverage intervention (capacity building) point. It constituted the target of this research along the wider and longer path of school improvement.

Figure 1 illustrates the core conceptual framework. The idea is that significant *changes in student learning, engagement, and success* depend on deep and sustained *changes in the practices in classrooms and schools*, and that these changes will emerge from the *teacher learning (professional knowledge creation and sharing)* that occurs through interaction within and across schools in networks. What this means is that it is learning and the creation of new knowledge that leads to deep conceptual changes and new ways of working in schools and classrooms.

The figure highlights three clusters of enablers, or rather enabling practices, that lead to this knowledge creation and sharing: the practice of establishing and supporting clear and defensible learning foci for students, teachers, and leaders; the practice of collaborative inquiry that challenges thinking and practice; and the practice of instructional leadership (both formal and informal). The "black" arrows (both the solid and the broken ones) represent the

¹ Katz, S., Earl, L. & Ben Jaafar, S. (2009). *Building and connecting learning communities: The power of networks for school improvement*. Thousand Oaks, Corwin Press.

relationship between these enablers and both the school and the network. The solid arrows link the school and the enablers. The broken arrows link the network and the enablers. The message we are conveying is that while the network does its work in terms of building capacity in these enabling practices, it is the school that is the locus of the kind of professional learning that can change thinking and practice. This means that the network doesn't bypass the school. It works by strengthening the within-school learning community to ensure that schools have the clear and defensible learning focus, skills for collaborative inquiry, and leadership (formal and informal) to influence professional learning. The model suggests that schools that are exhibiting these enablers at the school level can spread their practices by being part of a networked learning community. The idea is that schools can "upload" their individual ideas and practices into the network, which can be collectively considered, shaped and refined, and can spread to other sites and strengthen the entire networked learning community. In addition, individual schools can "download" ideas and practices from the network to support knowledge creation and sharing at the school level.

We know that the quality of classroom practice is the strongest predictor of student learning and achievement. We also know that classroom practice doesn't change in the areas in which it needs to until the *understanding* that is the foundation of the practice changes. That is why professional development activities that target the so-called "high-yield strategies" at the level of practice have limited success when it comes to implementation. Practice is the visible face of understanding. Changing practices means changing understanding. A clear and defensible learning focus, collaborative inquiry that challenges thinking and practice, and instructional leadership (formal and informal) "enable" the kind of professional learning that targets understanding, the knowledge that is the precursor to changed practice. And the work of the learning community is to build capacity in those three enablers.

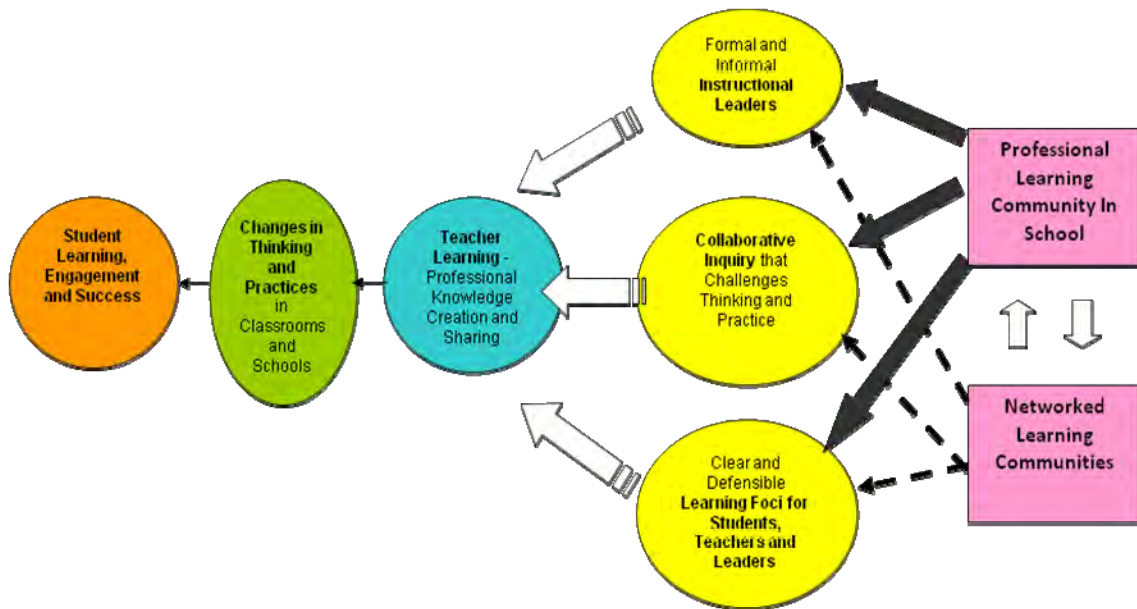


Figure 1

Clear and Defensible Learning Focus for Students, Teachers, and Leaders

For a long time educators have engaged in school improvement that’s “a mile wide and an inch deep”. This kind of school improvement agenda often has little impact because it isn’t “focused” enough. And this is the same reason that research shows that most professional learning communities don’t really translate into changed classroom practice and improved student learning. Establishing a focus means identifying an urgent student learning need, and – especially important - recognizing that this student learning need is an indicator of a *teacher* learning need. If students have difficulty making inferences from text as a key dimension of reading comprehension, for example, it is important to recognize that this is likely because teachers have difficulty *teaching* inference. It is only reasonable to expect changes in students’ understanding and practice of making inferences after teachers build an enhanced understanding for themselves, and then teach accordingly. This is an example of focus. A focus, by definition, is narrow. Choosing a focus doesn’t mean that you don’t care about other things. It’s simply about moving something urgent to the foreground, recognizing that everything in

the background is still there. And a focus is not a focus “for life” – it is selected because there is evidence that it is an urgent student (and therefore teacher) learning need, and once there is evidence to move on, you move on. Having this kind of clear and defensible learning focus for students and staff is necessary for the kind of professional learning that is the precursor to changes in practice, and ultimately, to changes in student achievement.

Collaborative Inquiry that Challenges Thinking and Practice

“Collaborative inquiry” involves two components – collaboration (working together) and inquiry (a search for deep understanding). Neither of these are simple concepts. Let’s begin with collaboration. Collaboration is what most people think about as the purpose of networks; collaboration is why you would want to bring people together. However, not all collaborations are equal, and working together for the sake of working together is not enough to move improvement forward. For collaboration to be an enabler of the kind of meaningful professional learning that can impact on practice, it needs to be more than just an inventory of group-based activities that someone hopes will make a difference. Practitioners need to be able to work together in a way that makes their knowledge accessible and explicit, and then subject it to scrutiny and challenge in an evidence-driven sense. That is, they need to practice *inquiry* together. Inquiry is about a need to know, or a search for deep understanding. The practice of inquiry promotes the challenge and reconstruction of professional knowledge on the basis of a body of evidence. Real inquiry is extremely difficult. Human beings are predisposed to preserve existing understandings of the world and they attempt to make new things familiar by transforming them into something that is consistent with what they already believe or “know”. Inquiry actually means working against this propensity, as deep understanding is not simply about confirming what people think they know, but rather about *changing* what people think and know. Thus, collaborative inquiry that challenges thinking and practice involves people working together in meaningful ways to deepen understanding and challenge what they already know and do.

Formal and Informal Instructional Leaders

It is not surprising that the kind of leadership that's an enabler of focused professional learning is *instructional leadership* (leadership related to curriculum, teaching, and learning), both formal and informal. Formal leadership is leadership by virtue of role and position. Formal leaders take responsibility for – and monitor – the learning focus in the school, and work to engage the whole school in the process. They protect the focus when other initiatives are being encouraged, and provide time and resources for staff to participate in focused professional learning. In addition to this, formal leaders create the conditions to realize the potential of informal leaders. Informal leadership has great promise because it's defined not by formal role or position, but by activity or expertise, either related to the focus (e.g., expert in what it means to learn and teach inference) or to change management (e.g., influential and respected by staff). Informal leaders do things like lead training sessions and participate in collaborative groups designed to deepen professional knowledge and to share learning in specific domains that are relevant to the school focus.

Research Question

In order to understand what it means to facilitate impactful professional learning communities, we asked the following question that emerged from the conceptual framework described above: What can we learn about facilitating impactful learning communities through a) establishing clear and defensible learning foci for students, teachers, and leaders b) collaborative inquiry that challenges thinking and practice, and c) formal and informal instructional leadership?

In the sections that follow, we outline the methodology used in the study and we present research data to illustrate the experiences and reflections of the participants as they facilitated the work of their identified professional learning communities (PLCs). In examining the work with their PLCs, we highlight the nature of facilitation in relation to a) issues around establishing and maintaining a learning focus, b) collaborative inquiry that challenges thinking and practice, and c) both formal and informal leadership activities.

Methodology

The research team chose a qualitative case study research design. This methodology allowed for an examination of the process by which those in facilitation roles work in their own real-life, authentic contexts². Case study methodology is an effective strategy for exploring situations in which the object of study (i.e., PLC facilitation) has no single set of outcomes³. It allowed the research team to examine and to present the perspectives of those involved with facilitating the work of PLCs.

Participants

The 135 participants in this research were part of a GTA PNC (Professional Network Centre) PLC capacity-building initiative, and included representation from 10 school districts. The participants included supervisory officers, principals, vice principals, and consultants/coaches who were responsible for facilitating the work of at least one PLC in their board. The PLCs varied in membership and context. For example, some school-based PLCs were led by principals, vice principals or literacy lead teachers, and group membership included school staff. Some board-level PLCs were facilitated by curriculum and leadership consultants or supervisory officers, and included members of school leadership teams, for instance. From this larger group of 135 participants, a small group of 5 individuals was purposefully selected for additional participation in focused interviews. The participants who were involved included:

- a numeracy consultant from a French language school board in southwestern Ontario, who coaches middle and high school teachers in mathematics strategies,
- a supervisory officer from an English language school board in northern Ontario, who works with PLCs throughout the district,
- a curriculum consultant and a principal with expertise in leadership who work with cross-school PLCs in their southern Ontario school board, and

² Yin, R. K. (1994). *Case study research: Design and methods* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

³ Ibid.

- a school principal in a southern Ontario school board, who is part of a cross-school PLC, but who also facilitates multiple PLCs within the school.

These participants were chosen because they were diverse: they represented three different school boards, they had different formal leadership responsibilities and experiences, and the nature (and structure) of their respective PLCs was varied as well.

Research Tools

Prior to the first in a series of three sessions with the facilitators, an assessment tool was developed, based on the three main enablers of impactful PLCs that were set out in the conceptual framework: learning foci, collaborative inquiry, and instructional leadership (see Appendix A). In the first section of the tool, the learning foci characteristics were listed. Here, specific learning foci that are important, related to student learning and teaching, and are clear, appropriate and shared, were identified. In the second section, collaborative inquiry features included what members think and why, seeking new information, and developing new theories and a shared understanding. Lastly, evidence of formal and informal leadership could be identified in the third section. An inventory of characteristics included members developing the PLC vision, focus and action plans, a shared responsibility and monitoring of the school improvement process, members assisting others in getting necessary resources and training, and members helping to keep the focus when other initiatives are introduced and encouraged. At the end of each section, a list of contra-indicators was included so that facilitators could identify any characteristics of their group's activities that interfered with the development of the primary enablers.

The assessment tool was divided into three columns for each of the enablers. It had a checklist of each enabler's characteristics, as noted above, and provided space for documenting observables or evidence that the characteristics were present, as well as the actions to be taken to enhance PLC impact. All participants were requested to submit completed assessment tools on at least two occasions. In addition to the facilitators' assessment tool, an individual facilitator interview protocol was developed for use with the five interview participants. The protocol was designed to be 45 to 60 minutes in length, its format was semi-structured, and the questions were open-ended. Questions addressed a) facilitators' professional background and

descriptions of their PLCs, b) descriptions of their conversations around learning foci, c) the nature of the conversations in PLC meetings, d) vision and focus development, e) how foci are maintained over time, f) members' access to resources, and g) what helps and what hinders PLC facilitation (see Appendix B for the Interview Protocol). The general questions were the starting point. Specific questions about each participant's experiences facilitating the learning foci, collaborative inquiry and leadership were added, based on their responses on their assessment tools.

Procedure and Data Collection Strategy

We (the research team) developed and led three, six-hour capacity-building sessions for the participants: the first one took place in September 2009, a second one in December 2009, and the final one in February 2010.

Each session was designed to develop participants' knowledge of facilitating the work of PLCs by building on the information presented in the previous session. In the first session, we provided an overview of the key enablers of impactful PLCs, and coached the participants on the ways to use the assessment tool. The second session began with a review of the main features of the enablers, and provided strategies for giving feedback and working with PLCs as a "critical friend." Using three completed assessment tool samples from volunteer participants, we guided the group's analysis of the volunteers' and their own areas of challenge for their PLCs, and led the participants' discussion of next steps for the PLCs. The final session began with a presentation of common problems of practice experienced by the participants, based on an analysis of their completed assessments. We guided their small group discussion of specific problems of practice they were experiencing while facilitating their PLC, and they used concepts learned in the previous session for providing feedback to facilitator colleagues about their PLCs' progress (see Appendix C for the Discussion Protocol). We conducted observations during the sessions that we led, and we collected additional data on the facilitation process through problem-solving with participants via e-mail between sessions.

Between sessions, there were opportunities for the facilitators to practice their developing skills during their PLC meetings and activities. They used the assessment tool, which was intended to assist the facilitators in their work. During their PLC encounters, or shortly

afterward, the facilitators used the assessment tool to guide their observations of their PLC's activities, to reflect on the group's work, and to plan their group's next steps. We sent e-mails approximately one month after the first and second sessions, asking all of the facilitators to submit their completed assessment tools. We received submissions at least twice, from October 2009 to February 2010. (Response rates of 27% and 11% for the first and second submissions respectively were somewhat disappointing, but the variability and richness was sufficient to unpack the "what are we learning about facilitating impactful PLCs" question that framed this research).

After sending requests for assessment submissions, we contacted the five facilitators who agreed to participate in interviews that took place after they submitted their completed assessment tools. Two interviews were conducted with the participants; one interview took place in December 2009 with each of the five facilitators and one in February 2010 with four of the five facilitators (the numeracy consultant was not available). We digitally audio-recorded the conversations and took notes during the interviews.

Data Analysis

Multiple sources of data were collected to establish construct validity through the triangulation of the data⁴. Following the interviews, the audio-recordings and notes were reviewed, and field notes were written. We conducted a document analysis of the completed assessment tools as well as the e-mail communication from participants.

The constant comparative method was used in which the data from each participant and event were continuously examined and incidents were compared across the data⁵. In this way, new categories and themes were developed and existing ones were evaluated and modified. Because of the low rates of return for the completed assessments, the findings from the analyses may not be representative of all PLCs in the network, or generalizable to all PLC

⁴ Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
Rothe, J. P. (2000). *Undertaking qualitative research*. Edmonton, Canada: The University of Alberta Press.
Yin, R. K. (1994). *Case study research: Design and methods* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

⁵ Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (1982). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

facilitators. Nevertheless, the findings provide valuable insight into facilitation, and they are part of an on-going effort to understand the process of facilitating impactful PLCs.

Findings and Discussion

Most of the PLCs featured in this research were in the early stages of development. “PLCs are having an impact, but not in the classroom yet,” according to one facilitator. From another: “I know we’re far from where we need to go. Still a concern on my part...: ‘How deep’ is the practice going?” Nevertheless, the PLCs in the study were becoming more robust over time with the facilitators’ help. As they guided their groups’ work, they encountered supports and challenges in relation to their facilitation of their PLC’s progress toward explicit learning foci for students and adults, collaborative inquiry that challenge thinking and practice, and shared instructional leadership. In the subsections that follow, the findings and discussion are framed by the questions the research team had about the relationship between the facilitators and the primary enablers, or key features, of impactful learning communities. The section concludes with a discussion of the facilitators’ contextual circumstances that potentially influenced their work with PLCs.

What are we learning about facilitation in relation to developing clear and defensible learning foci for the students, teachers and leaders?

At the conclusion of the sessions, most of the facilitators who completed assessments on their PLCs (75%) reported that their group members had common goals, that there was shared knowledge among PLC members, and that the learning foci were linked to improving student learning.

Facilitating the facilitators’ work. In some cases, the facilitators initially spent time with their PLCs to develop points of agreement before attending to learning foci. One facilitator noted, “Heads of (the) departments (have been) working as a group for a while, (they have) spent time working together on Head structures and roles, grounding their prior knowledge in the reading, and discussing.” Some of the facilitators used data to develop agreed-upon professional learning foci and to link them to student learning. As one principal stated, “The SOs shared data with the staff, the staff analyzed the EQAO data together, and came to a consensus

that students must read for meaning and work towards higher-order thinking.” Another facilitator claimed that there was “regular use of data to set and reflect on goals” for the PLC.

As these facilitators found, using data is a way to build community in organizations while guiding school improvement.⁶ Researchers Supovitz and Klein looked at the use of three different sources of student performance data (external, school-wide and individual) and their uses. They found that external assessments, such as EQAO results, were used for identifying initial direction, creating topics for early professional development, identifying students’ needs, setting long-term goals and celebrating successes.⁷ School-wide assessments, such as the Developmental Reading Assessment and PM Benchmark, used throughout the school year, enabled teachers to modify their teaching strategies based on feedback, to refine individual plans for students, to provide their own feedback to administration regarding professional development needs, and were a vehicle for faculty to examine relationships between teaching practices and student learning.⁸ Lastly, individual assessments were used by teachers for tailoring their practices to meet their students’ needs.⁹

In this study, as in existing literature, evidence played a central role in school improvement.¹⁰ Data use gave educators a common language for communicating, and enabled them to examine and reflect on their practice in relation to students’ needs.

PLCs: Works in progress. Fewer facilitators (50%) reported that their PLCs’ learning foci were “narrow enough”, although more facilitators reported that they had narrowed their foci by February, 2010 than in December, 2009. Similarly, about half of the facilitators claimed that their PLCs’ foci targeted how a concept is learned or taught, and two thirds of the PLCs (66%) had foci that identified adult learning needs related to students’ needs. As one facilitator noted, “We are having difficulty knowing what the adult learning looks like. At this point, we are looking at options. Everyone works together at this point trying to figure it out.” Another

⁶ Supovitz, J. & Klein, V. (2003). *Mapping a course for improved student learning: How innovative schools systematically use student performance data to guide improvement*. Philadelphia: Consortium for Policy Research in Education.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Earl, L., & Katz, S. (2006). *Leading schools in a data-rich world: Harnessing data for school improvement*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

facilitator observed of her PLC members that the “teachers are not seeing the relationship between the children’s learning needs and their own learning needs; however, they are starting to question their own practices.” It seems likely that these understandings and skills would be developed with continued guidance on the parts of the facilitators.

Establishing some commonality at the beginning of their work and having an overarching goal of working for the benefit of the students were priorities and seem to be the areas that the facilitators felt they needed and were able to address first, before turning their attention to narrowing their foci, examining how something is learned or taught, and addressing the adults’ learning needs explicitly. Between December, 2009 and February, 2010 though, there were more facilitators reporting that their activities were focused on the latter two areas, which may indicate that the PLCs were at the point where facilitators were able to guide their groups in discussions about learning and teaching concepts related to the learning focus, and about what members needed in order to build their own professional skills and knowledge so they could meet students’ needs.

Facilitators’ challenges. The fact that the indicators for the focus enabler were reported to be present in three quarters of the PLCs at most indicates that several factors may have impeded the facilitators’ ability to lead their PLCs in establishing a high-leverage focus. Almost half of the facilitators who submitted assessments observed that there was a lack of purposeful coherence in the activities of their PLCs, while a third of the facilitators noted that professional development opportunities were limited or few. As a result, many PLCs were “teaching organizations” and not “learning for teaching organizations”¹¹. In order for them to move toward being “learning for teaching organizations”, intentional opportunities for members to develop their professional knowledge in meaningful ways that connect with the larger instructional vision to promote student achievement need to be available.¹²

Data use, or lack thereof, may have been a contributor. Several facilitators observed that the lack of coherence was related to the PLC’s use of data: one facilitator commented, “The foci (do) lack purposeful coherence – SMART goals and SIPs have been developed, but

¹¹ Supovitz, J. (2006). *The case for district-based reform: Leading, building, and sustaining school improvement*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

¹² Ibid.

they are not directly linked to data (DRA, OLA, RR, etc.).” Some facilitators were still having difficulty guiding all or part of their PLC membership to use data. In the words of one facilitator, “the teachers in the junior division are using what they know about their students to choose their next focus; however, primary teachers are not using data to determine (their) next focus.”

As previously mentioned, many of the PLCs were formed at the beginning of the school year, and the members had not been working together for long. Some PLCs did not have many opportunities to formally meet together, which also likely influenced the facilitators’ progress with establishing meaningful learning foci. As one facilitator noted, the “schools never come together to work, so my opportunities to work with teachers in each school are limited to regional PDs and individual school visits.” Other facilitators acknowledged that PLC members were busy, and had difficulty finding time to do the type of reflective, critical thinking needed. Lack of time on the task and together as a group may have limited the members’ agreed-upon use and analysis of data, as well as their overall progress in establishing high-leverage learning foci.

The early stages of the PLCs’ work also potentially impacted the resource availability issue. A number of facilitators and their PLCs were not at a point to know what material, intellectual and financial resources they would need. There was nothing to indicate that the resources would not be available once they established and refined their foci and determined their needs. (Resource availability will be discussed in further detail in the leadership subsection.) On the other hand, other facilitators noted that professional development opportunities for their PLCs were limited: “Access varies depending on different departments and schools for district-level PLCs”. For another facilitator, the PLC itself was the vehicle for professional learning, and few other resources were available.

While the available time and resources were challenges for facilitators and their work, PLC members’ dispositions also influenced the PLCs’ progress. Some facilitators cited resistance as an issue among some PLC members or the broader community impacted by the PLC work. For instance, not all teachers in the school-level PLCs wanted to engage in the work. One facilitator noted, “Staff learning needs are varied, (and) not all are engaged or responsive to (the) school focus.” Another observed that the PLCs “are struggling with maintaining (the)

focus, and (are) abandoning the ‘real work’.” Some PLC members were negative toward the PLC work; they either did not want to “step up” and take an active role in the PLC, or they did not follow through with the agreed-upon activities. These types of behaviours and attitudes potentially interfered with the facilitators’ ability to support the development of a learning focus. For instance, one facilitator reported having difficulty getting access to classrooms to guide the work on strategies for changing practice, as a result of teachers’ resistance and apprehension. Research on school-wide reforms highlights the importance of buy-in. If support for the PLC focus is not there, resistance needs to be confronted and buy-in cultivated quickly because even small groups of unhappy teachers can interfere with the PLC progress, or influence others’ enthusiasm for the work.¹³ Further discussion of the nature of the resistance encountered and its impact on the learning focus and collaborative conversations that needed to take place for PLC progress will follow in the next subsection when issues around collaborative inquiry are addressed.

What are we learning about facilitating the kind of collaborative inquiry in the PLC that is required to establish, refine, and move a learning focus forward?

By the final session in late February, 2010, most facilitators (87%) who submitted completed assessments of their PLC progress reported having everyone who needed to be included as members of the learning community. The conversations during the PLC work were reported to more frequently be about what members thought and why. Most facilitators (80%) felt that members’ ideas, beliefs and feelings were clear, explicit and available for exploration through the group’s discussion. This sets the stage for the kind of knowledge creation (that results in changes in thinking and practice) to occur.¹⁴ As one facilitator observed, “Members are beginning to feel comfortable sharing professional views and starting to challenge others in a constructive way.”

¹³ Datnow, A., Hubbard, L., & Mehan, H. (2002). *Extending educational reform: From one school to many*. NY: RoutledgeFalmer.

¹⁴ Hakkarainen, K., Palonen, T., Paavola, S., & Lehtinen, E. (2004). *Communities of networked expertise: Professional and educational perspectives*. Amsterdam: Elsevier.

Facilitating the facilitators' work. Although there was still some reluctance and holding back, the facilitators reported that trust was developing, as were relationships among membership over the course of working together. "Relational trust" is developed when members respect one another and their ideas, and are confident that members are competent professionals who put their students in the forefront of their efforts.¹⁵ This likely contributed to the increasingly frequent discussions around members' beliefs and ideas, strategies for improving learning and teaching, as well as the investigation of existing information and theories. This type of trust is a building block for developing professional community and creating shared expectations for collaborative work.¹⁶

Time and experience together played a role. The facilitator of a group that had been working together at length had this to say: "All PLC members have developed a good level of trust, as we [have met] once a month... (for) the last 4 years. New members to the PLC quickly see modeled, open communication that honestly shares their concerns, limitations of solutions and their successes." To assist in the process for those PLCs that had not worked together at length, some school-level facilitators were using Tribes Learning Community strategies or guest speakers to encourage trust development among their members and the broader school community. For other facilitators, the opportunity and process of working together were what helped members to see that their work together was potentially beneficial for students, and an enriching experience for themselves. One facilitator remarked as follows:

One principal (PLC member) felt her school had a lot to offer but not much to gain in the PLC, and this doesn't build trust. The members are now working together and there's something all schools in the PLC can benefit from and that builds trust. All schools need to feel that there's a reason to be there, and this is developing.

Another facilitator noted that over time, members may come to rely on each other in the PLC, which would provide support to the individual members, and strengthen their work together as they address student and adult learning needs.

¹⁵ Bryk, A., & Schneider, B. (2002). *Trust in schools: A core resource for improvement*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

¹⁶ Katz, S., Earl, L. M., & Ben Jaafar, S. (2009). *Building and connecting learning communities: The power of networks for school improvement*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

PLCs: Works in progress. From December, 2009 to February, 2010 there was a substantial increase (to two-thirds) in the number of facilitators (who had persisted in monitoring the work of their PLCs) and reported discussions around theories of student learning and teaching, examinations of existing knowledge and theories, investigations based on problems and questions generated in the group, as well as the development of new theories and shared understanding. This is likely in part because of the emerging trust among the members. One PLC facilitator reported, “Teachers are genuinely sharing what they are doing in their classes and discussing ideas/suggestions of how to make changes. Having the literacy teacher present has been helpful because she too is sending them back to ‘try it in your class’ and then share.” Another school-level PLC facilitator noted, “Teachers are able to articulate needing to do things differently to achieve different results. Group members challenge each other when a ‘familiar strategy’ or task emerges.” These activities are hallmarks of impactful PLCs; investigating theories and strategies, and proposing solutions and testing them in an ongoing process yield the possibility for common understanding and purpose, practices that more effectively meet needs, as well as shared knowledge, experience and goals.¹⁷ That said, there was less evidence of these “high yield” indicators being in place, compared to the prevalence of PLCs having all individuals with a stake in the PLC work present and discussing what members thought and why.

Even fewer facilitators noted “evidence of monitoring and impact” indicators. Just over half of facilitators (53%) reported that group members were looking for and working with new information, using new ways of sharing and working together, and improving their ideas through these activities. A small number of facilitators (20%) reported assessing the strengths and weaknesses of theories and developing solutions. These are ways for knowledge created by individuals in the group to be spread among members and used for further knowledge creation¹⁸; however, they were relative rarities across the PLCs. Just under half of the

¹⁷ Supovitz, J. (2006). *The case for district-based reform: Leading, building, and sustaining school improvement*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Katz, S., Earl, L. M., & Ben Jaafar, S. (2009). *Building and connecting learning communities: The power of networks for school improvement*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

¹⁸ Hakkarainen, K., Palonen, T., Paavola, S., & Lehtinen, E. (2004). *Communities of networked expertise: Professional and educational perspectives*. Amsterdam: Elsevier.

facilitators (44%) were at the stage where their PLC was creating new knowledge around the learning focus. In the words of one school-level PLC facilitator, “Conversations are just starting to happen that drive instruction. (There is) still some holding back, and no real analysis about the teaching that is happening.” Another noted that many group members are asking thought-provoking questions, but “some members are still holding on to counter-productive ideas and theories”.

For the most part, PLC members were not engaging in critical reflection necessary to assess existing theories and develop innovative solutions. This is a necessary step before real changes in classroom practice can be made.¹⁹

Facilitators’ challenges. More globally, the limited evidence of some key indicators noted by facilitators and previously mentioned in this section may be attributed in part to members’ activities that impeded PLCs’ progress. Almost half of the facilitators (47%) observed that their PLCs’ discussions promoted existing practices rather than challenged the status quo, and more than a third of the facilitators (40%) reported that conversations rested on circumstances beyond their control to explain the issues affecting the focus. In the words of one facilitator:

There was considerable resistance to implementing the [initiative].... There were numerous complaints regarding the time required, even though release time was provided. Some insisted that the [initiative] did nothing to address the lack of student motivation. I was told that the teachers did not require PD – they were not the “problem”. Their students need the coaching and training, not the teachers.

Another facilitator commented, “The ‘resistors’ in the PLC bring up issues dealing with work overload and student characteristics to justify their questions of the SMART goals, School Learning Improvement Plan and Teaching Learning Critical Pathway.” Several school-level facilitators speculated that there was resistance among members possibly because their school was identified as needing support, or fear that their performance was being criticized.

The prevalence of these types of practices actually increased over the course of the year, in parallel with increases in the PLCs’ open discussions around extant and necessary

¹⁹ James, M. & McCormick, R. (in press). Teachers learning to learn. *Teachers and Teacher Education*.

knowledge and skills related to student and adult learning needs. The more open and honest the conversations, the more vulnerable the participants become. The contra-indicators described above appear as “defense mechanisms” of sorts.

Another dimension of challenge appeared in places where students’ learning needs were “already being met” as determined by student achievement results. In some cases, there was no sense of urgency felt by the PLC members. Consistent with existing research, if the learning focus was not authentic, teachers would likely resist changes.²⁰ One facilitator noted:

Members believe their ideas and beliefs are clear and explicit. Students are performing well in assessments; ... therefore, beliefs and practice are not challenged. That being said, new administration to the school has challenged existing teacher practices, both within and outside the classroom. Presuppositions are being questioned and the teachers are moving to a new understanding.

This comment underscores the importance of facilitation as intentional “interruption” (of the status quo). Tacit knowledge will shape actions and beliefs, and impede change unless members are assisted in questioning their knowledge. Facilitators need to focus on asking thought-provoking questions of their PLC members to encourage challenges to current beliefs, knowledge and theories. In this way, a robust series of practices are continually sought to enhance student learning in all schools, regardless of the starting points for the students.

What are we learning about facilitation in relation to the formal and informal leadership capacities that are necessary for establish, refine, and move a learning focus forward?

Almost all of the facilitators (92%) who submitted assessments reported that leaders in the PLC with formal authority provided resources and the time for staff to participate in focused professional learning. These leaders also took responsibility for monitoring the school improvement process and the PLCs’ work around the focus, according to the majority of the facilitators (83%). Further, most facilitators (75%) observed the formal leaders as the ones who led the vision and focus development. Typically, administrators, leadership teams, department heads, supervisory officers, consultants and lead teachers took on the responsibilities.

²⁰ Datnow, A., Hubbard, L., & Mehan, H. (2002). *Extending educational reform: From one school to many*. NY: RoutledgeFalmer.

Facilitating the facilitators' work. A number of strategies were reported by facilitators as being supportive of the work. Coordinating and giving release time was a frequently cited strategy at both the board and school levels. For example, one school PLC facilitator noted that the principal “provides each teacher with one day in the five day cycle without duty, so that they can have a meeting and still get the needed lunch break. This was to provide staff with time during the instructional day to meet.” Two school boards that supported school PLC development and activities provided time each month in one case and six opportunities over the year in the other for the school personnel to meet.

Other strategies included providing opportunities to learn from colleagues and experts. One facilitator reported that there was “money set aside for staff to attend workshops and conferences to deepen professional learning, (and) time available for staff to visit other schools, meet with consultants and grade partners....” The formal leader in another school PLC brought in speakers for professional development in relation to the focus. Yet another PLC was provided with opportunities for members to work with and receive support from the central team in the creation of pre and post assessment tasks related to their current unit of study. One facilitator described a way PLC members shared information without meeting face to face:

We have created a *Staff Working Wall* located in the staff work room. Located directly above the photocopiers our school curriculum focus is clearly written as a target. Resources are clipped to clipboards under various headings where staff including administration/support staff share strategies, ideas and resources that they may [have] come across [in] various PD sessions they attended or professional readings they have done.

PLCs: Works in progress. Leadership is not only connected to formal position; rather, it can be based in activities and practices that are distributed over a number of people who may or may not have a recognized leadership position.²¹ That said, the facilitators reported the presence of fewer informal leadership indicators overall. Close to half of the facilitators (42%) claimed that leadership resided exclusively with members with formal authority, though this appears to be changing in some places. One facilitator observed that “at one of the schools in the PLC, there is not much shared leadership although this is changing”, and another facilitator

²¹ Spillane, J. (2006). *Distributed leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

noted “there is a core of four staff members who have the capacity to provide PD for the staff. Through knowledge sharing, the capacity of our staff will increase.”

When present, the main role for informal leaders was to create action plans, coordinate improvement initiative activities and evaluate the progress in relation to the learning foci, according to two thirds of the facilitators (67%). Informal leaders also assisted their colleagues’ access to resources and professional activities (58%). “Teachers support each others’ growth by providing in-school PD, for example, tech coach sessions, sharing of information from in-services, etc.” according to one facilitator. Half of the facilitators observed that informal leaders deepened their professional knowledge and enhanced their skills, and encouraged others to do the same as well. To a lesser extent, informal leaders were sharing information about the school activities to families and/or the public (42%). A number of facilitators reported that school and classroom newsletters, websites and newspapers were used to share information. One facilitator stated that “monthly newsletters are sent out with a general summary of school activities. Some grades are using the school website for weekly descriptions of class activities.” (It is not clear, though, if the learning foci and related activities were privileged in these communications in any way.)

Regular meetings and the work of the PLC provided the type of “organizational routine” and structured opportunities to build informal leadership and professional community.²² That said, if teachers are to develop as leaders, formal leaders need to provide opportunities for this to happen.²³ The facilitators will likely need to ensure that leadership roles are distributed among PLC members and individuals in the broader school community to develop buy-in and ownership of the PLC work, as well as the capacity to see learning needs, proactively seek out information and put new learning into practice.

Facilitators’ challenges. A number of PLC facilitators reported not having material and time to develop the members’ knowledge and skills related to the focus. One facilitator at a

²² Halverson, R. R. (2007). Systems of practice and professional community: The Adams case. In J. P. Spillane & J. B. Diamond (Eds.), *Distributed leadership in practice* (pp. 35-59). New York: Teachers College Press.

²³ Ibid.

Spillane, J., & Diamond, J. B. (2007). A distributed perspective on and in practice. In J. P. Spillane & J. B. Diamond (Eds.), *Distributed leadership in practice* (pp. 146-166). New York: Teachers College Press.

school observed resistance from some members of staff who will not do the “work “without time provided to do so:

The bi-weekly meetings are serving as good “touchstones” but not enough time to develop and build the capacity of knowledge and skills necessary to improve practice and achievement. Staff who require “pressure” to buy in are currently not feeling the pressure and therefore do not have the impetus to make change.

There was a substantial increase in this contra-indicator (inadequate time and material support) during the research study: there were no reports in December, 2009, but a third of the facilitators (33%) noted its influence on their PLC by the final session. In other words, this appears more as a sustainability challenge than a “forming” one. There were suggestions that other initiatives may have interfered by taking the time and attention away from capacity-building work related to the focus. The effects of challenges to the PLCs’ work from the broader environment were not always kept at bay; this is a leadership function.

Facilitators seem to have experienced difficulty guiding the leaders in minimizing the impact of other initiatives. Just over half of the facilitators (58%) reported that the formal leaders were able to keep the focus while just under half (42%) stated the informal leaders were able to do so. One facilitator noted that the “principal is respectful of the workload, and careful not to ‘overactivity’ the staff”. Other facilitators noted that the formal and informal leaders were not as successful in this area. One facilitator observed that:

All members of the PLC are frustrated by the constant demands made by the Board and Ministry: initiative after initiative is downloaded onto the school and its teachers. PLC members are burning out. More release time for teachers to meet and discuss the status of the foci would be beneficial.

Once there are agreed-upon foci, formal leaders take a key role in maintaining them. They do this through showing members how the foci are aligned and not competing with other requirements and practices, and they buffer and protect the learning foci when presented with multiple and disparate initiatives that have the potential to interfere with the work.²⁴ Guiding

²⁴ Katz, S., Earl, L. M., & Ben Jaafar, S. (2009). *Building and connecting learning communities: The power of networks for school improvement*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

PLC members in sustaining attention and work on the respective learning focus is an area that requires intentional interruption from facilitators in a culture that is fraught with initiatives.

Facilitation Capacity in Relation to Contextual Circumstances

In the previous sections, the facilitators' experiences and work were analyzed without considering particular contextual circumstances and characteristics. In this section, we look at context and circumstance based on findings from the interviews and assessments of the five case study participants.

Facilitators' formal authority, and their PLC roles. The hierarchical structure of education likely plays a part in facilitators' ability to support their PLCs. It can shape the facilitators' interactions with PLC members, and influence the work of the group. One facilitator noted that the hierarchy was the biggest challenge and a huge barrier to the work. She saw herself as a co-learner with the other PLC members, questioning thinking and practice as she was encouraging others to do. "At some level, I know I'm seen as the principal. How can I ask the question so it's less threatening? It's difficult to juggle being the boss with being the lead learner." This facilitator had been the school principal for three years, and thought she had built trust and a supportive atmosphere conducive to risk-taking. Still, she could see that "some staff still have an 'us and them' mentality", and were apprehensive.

Another facilitator spoke about experiences guiding PLC members with more formal authority than her own. With expertise in curriculum and experience as a consultant, the facilitator reported being careful how she presented information and ideas to the principals with whom she was working. She explained that when guiding discussions around a strategy or initiative, she might ask "Is that going to change what you see the kids doing when you walk into the class?" instead of telling the principals that "it's not going to impact what's going on in the classrooms." This facilitator noted that a hierarchy did exist, and she followed protocol when engaging with PLC members and supervisory officers, and when making decisions around the PLC so that she did not extend her authority beyond its limits. That said, the facilitator observed that it was necessary to set aside formal roles in order to do the work.

Issues of compliance seem to be linked to facilitators' formal positions in the board. The facilitators noted the importance of members' buy-in: "We need to have the 'nots' on board and the 'secret nots' who aren't on board but who say they are, supporting the PLC work. I can't do this alone," according to one facilitator (who is a school principal). This facilitator observed support for the PLC activities from some members, and reluctant compliance as well as both overt and covert resistance from some other members. In this and other cases, the facilitators were directly responsible for evaluating members' performance of their regular duties, as well as guiding the PLC activities.

Another facilitator, who was a supervisory officer working with a number of PLCs in the board as a critical friend, shed light on the potential impact of being an immediate superior of PLC members. In discussing the work with a PLC of principals and teachers, the facilitator stated, "The principals aren't accountable to me. I'm not their SO, so it's easier. I don't get compliant behaviour. They don't care what I think – I'm not responsible for determining which school they'll be moved to, for example – so they can be really honest." It does not seem to be the overarching position of power that makes the difference, so much as the potential decision-making power the facilitator has over the members' circumstances or professional lives. Having "objectivity", or some occupational distance from the PLC was considered an asset for leading its activities.

Facilitators' capacity for guiding the PLC work. The facilitators' capacities were a function of their time and experience in the role, and to some degree for several facilitators, the scheduling of these responsibilities. One facilitator who was new to the responsibility noted how difficult it was to know when to ask questions of the group and what to ask. "How do you know when to interrupt? What do you interrupt with? Sometimes I'll ask questions and the silence will go on for four or five minutes and still nothing; just silence. That's the hardest part of facilitation." One seasoned facilitator talked about the preparation needed to guide members' thinking around the focus. "To come up with thought-provoking questions to guide the members' thinking requires an understanding of all tasks and concepts involved. I spent 18 hours before our last meeting to figure out how to get the principals to reflect on issues and come up with their own answers." This facilitator was a curriculum specialist who guided the

members around their schools' practice, which possibly made it easier to identify questions to challenge members' thinking. In other words, she knew a whole lot because she had done the hard work of learning before. For facilitators who are learning alongside the PLC participants, there is less direct content knowledge to exploit and knowing how to learn becomes essential in terms of adding value.

Practice appears to be key in building the requisite facilitation capacity. Several individuals spoke of the impact their facilitation experience had on their work with PLCs. Two facilitators stated that they had a lot of experience with PLCs in the board. They noted that they have done professional reading that teachers and principals simply do not have time to do, and that the activities of their PLCs informed one another. The breadth of their work helped them to build their own capacity as facilitators. In the words of one individual, "Work with one PLC informs my work with another. There is coherence among [PLCs]; they're all struggling with the same things." Having credibility, which was developed over time, was also helpful. One facilitator stated that it was not so much her formal position or role but her track record and longevity in the position that made an impact on the PLC members. Another facilitator observed that he had credibility with school administrators in the PLCs because he had previously led an improving school. It is possible that their credibility assisted the facilitators to guide their PLCs by garnering more support for their leadership than was possible for facilitators without this type of experience.

Broader networks of support were also identified as important for guiding the PLC work. One school-level facilitator had another administrator on campus with whom to debrief about the PLC activities and progress. Other facilitators were able to connect with other facilitators doing the same type of work with their own PLCs. All of the facilitators noted the importance of having the support of their superiors and colleagues at the board for PLCs generally and for their work specifically. Training, feedback and assistance with problem-solving were some of the ways these facilitators benefited from their networks of associates. This is likely a promising way to support the facilitators as they work with their PLCs, especially for those who are new to facilitation and do not personally have the breadth of experience that more seasoned facilitators possess.

There was a downside for those facilitators working with more than one PLC. Two facilitators stated that the volume of work was overwhelming. In some cases, their work with PLCs was back-to-back, and difficult facilitations were tiring. In the words of one facilitator, “It’s hard to let go of conversations from the morning”, which made it a challenge to work with another PLC in the afternoon. In contrast, another facilitator noted that the week was proportioned so that time was allocated to get training, to meet with a network of facilitators, to visit schools and to work with PLCs, for example.

Facilitation as an evolving role. Several of the experienced facilitators offered some insight into their roles and how they changed over time, or with the PLCs’ stage of development. One facilitator described using a constructivist approach and moving away from telling members what the PLC work would look like. In previous years, PLC members felt facilitators owned the work. This year, the facilitator was supporting a shift in approach by “temperature-taking”, but letting members shape the thinking and activities of the group. In the PLC used for this research, for instance, the facilitator met with the PLC co-chairs and reflected on meetings during the first few months. It was not about the facilitator giving PLC members definitions around their core work; rather, it was about members analyzing the language and selecting terms that were meaningful to them and using a common language for their work together.

Similarly, another facilitator remarked on a shift in approach over the course of working with one PLC of principals and teachers. Since December, the facilitator has stepped back from planning with the principals, and “sit(s) back more now” in meetings. Members wanted the facilitator to listen carefully and provide thoughts on group members’ professional learning as well as share what she saw happening in other schools, for example. Often, the teachers in the group did the moderation. The nature of the questions the facilitator asked changed as well. Instead of asking process questions, the facilitator reported that she asked questions that prompted members to analyze what they had just said or to challenge their work; in other words, her role transitioned to one of “interruption”.

Concluding Thoughts

This project has contributed to our evolving understanding of what facilitating impactful professional learning entails because this is what defines the work of successful learning communities. We have come to understand that facilitation is less about a particular person than a particular role. What we are looking to facilitate is focused professional learning that takes the form of deep understanding or conceptual change. We've seen supervisory officers, curriculum resource staff, school administrators, and teachers all take on the facilitator role, depending on the particular learning community context. What matters most is that the role is intentional and that it is focused on interrupting the default or status quo. Traditionally, facilitation in school contexts has been about aggregation, about building consensus by identifying the common denominator (or, to be more accurate, the lowest common denominator) in the face of disagreement. But we know that the most productive collaborative encounters – the stuff of impactful learning communities – grow out of challenges to thinking and practice that are only possible in the presence of push back, be it from written or spoken words. And make no mistake about it, this is an uncomfortable feeling. It's why we tend to avoid it. And it's why facilitation must interrupt that avoidance tendency by showing us that discomfort isn't an unfortunate by-product of real new learning, it's an essential prerequisite.

Appendix A
Facilitator Assessment Tool



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Professional Learning Community Facilitator Assessment Tool and Facilitator Log

Overview of the Professional Learning Community Facilitator Assessment Tool and Facilitator Log

In the sections that follow, we will give you a brief overview of the assessment tool and the accompanying log.

The Purpose of the Assessment Tool and Facilitator Log

The assessment tool and log are specifically designed to assist you in identifying the directions of your professional learning community, monitoring its progress, and shaping its future development. You may use the assessment tool and log in a couple of ways. First, you can use them during meetings to guide the meetings' proceedings and record the happenings, and secondly, you can use them between meetings to help you reflect on the directions of your professional learning community and plan a course of action.

Preparing to Use the Assessment Tool and Facilitator Log

Before using the tool during your professional learning community meetings, familiarize yourself with the sections of the tool and the facilitator log. They are divided into three sections, which correspond to the three components of effective professional learning communities: the learning foci, collaborative inquiry, and leadership. Each of the three components has its own section of the assessment tool, with questions to guide the professional learning community's discussions, a checklist of indicators that the components are present or not, space to include evidence of the indicators, and space to note down the actions that are or will be taken in the professional learning community.

Using the Assessment Tool and Facilitator Log

Now that you have familiarized yourself with the materials and read the sections, you are ready to use the assessment tool and log. You will use one assessment tool and facilitator log form for each meeting, or other type of interaction among learning community members.

The Component Questions

The questions are located below the component headings at the tops of pages 1, 3 and 5 of the assessment tool. These are the types of questions that will provide opportunities to discuss the components in some detail. You should be listening for them (or similar ones) and/or discussions around their topics in your professional learning community meetings and other interactions with learning community members. If the types of conversations that are generated by these kinds of general questions are not present, you may choose to pose them to the group members.

The Indicators and Contra-indicators

The checklists of indicators and contra-indicators are located in the assessment tool's first column. The indicators are statements that demonstrate the components (i.e., the learning foci, collaborative inquiry, and formal and informal leadership) are present. The contra-indicators are statements that demonstrate that the components are not present, or may not be supported strongly enough to be effective. You may not see evidence of all indicators during a meeting or other types of interactions with members, and that is okay. During (or after) each meeting or other interaction among members of the professional learning community, check off all of the indicators or contra-indicators that are evident. There are several ways to use this information. When you are checking off the statements during a meeting for example, if you observe that the contra-indicators and very few of the indicators are checked off, you might want to redirect the conversations by asking some of the questions located below the component headings. If you are completing the section following a meeting, you might want to reflect on how you might restructure conversations, and what specific actions you (or others) might take in the future activities of the professional learning community once you have completed a summary of the indicator and contra-indicator evidence.

The Evidence of the Indicators and Contra-indicators

The assessment tool's second column is the evidence (observables), such as comments, discussions, events or actions, that shows the indicator (or contra-indicator) exists. Ask yourself the question, "How do I know (the particular indicator) is present?" The assessment tool requires you to list the summary evidence of the indicators and contra-indicators. You may find it useful to use the facilitator log to list all of the evidence. On the facilitator log, the indicators and contra-indicators are listed and numbered for your convenience below the component headings. During meetings and other occasions for interactions among learning community members, note down in point form the events or actions, discussions, observations, and comments that provide evidence that the indicators or contra-indicators are present. You do not need to provide detail; a couple of descriptive lines should be enough for each indicator or contra-indicator. Refer to the list of indicators and contra-indicators, and write the corresponding numbers in the right-hand column beside each observable. Review the observables, and the types and frequencies of the indicators and contra-indicators. Refer back to the assessment tool, and note down this information in the summary evidence of indicators and contra-indicators sections.

Actions Taken Based on the Evidence

Once you have reviewed the observables you have included in the facilitator log and the summary log, reflect on the actions that need to be taken, as well as who needs to initiate the actions and when the actions will take place. Sometimes you will be able to see the trends during a meeting, and will be able to act right away to guide the conversations or activities. As in the previous example, if you can see that the contra-indicators are checked off and very few indicators are checked off for a component, you might want to pose some of the questions listed under the component heading to steer the conversations and activities in the direction to address the component and increase your community's effectiveness. At other times, you will need to determine a course of action after the event. If you see that evidence of some of the indicators is missing, ask yourself what needs to be in place for the indicators to be addressed in future meetings or other interactions.

Questions About the Assessment Tool and Facilitator Log

We hope that you will find the assessment tool and facilitator log useful for your work with your professional learning community. If you have any questions about the assessment tool and log when you are using them, please contact us.

<p>Contra-indicators (check all that apply):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="radio"/> There is a lack of purposeful coherence; the foci do not address the PLC goals<input type="radio"/> Professional development opportunities for PLC and school members are limited or few, and not directly addressing the specific PLC goals		
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Collaborative Inquiry: The Process to Impact on the Learning Foci

There are three components you will need to consider during your PLC discussions:

- a) the learning foci validity, vitality and value
- b) the nature of the learning conversation
- c) the monitoring and impact around the learning foci

The following are types of general questions you, as the facilitator, can listen for, and foster during discussions around your PLC's collaborative inquiry:

The Learning Foci and Conversation: *What do we already know that we can use to promote student outcomes? What do we need to learn to do to promote improved student outcomes?*

Monitoring and Impact: *What sources of evidence/knowledge can we utilize? What has been the impact of our changed actions? How effective has what have we learned and done been in promoting valued student outcomes?*

Indicators and Contra-indicators	Evidence of the Indicators and Contra-indicators	Actions Taken Based on the Evidence
<p>Indicators are observables that suggest your PLC's discussions include the group members' effective collaborative inquiry around your focus.</p> <p>Contra-indicators are warning signs that your discussions may not be as collaborative or as progressive as your PLC needs them to be for optimal success.</p>	<p>The evidence may be comments, discussions, happenings or specific actions taken in the PLC meetings, and/or at the school site(s), for example. Include a brief description of indicator (or contra-indicator) examples.</p>	
<p>Indicators (check all that apply):</p> <p>Learning Foci and Conversation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="radio"/> All of the individuals who have knowledge and influence on (and are influenced by) the learning foci are included in the PLC <input type="radio"/> Issues are connected to deep principles and members care about them <input type="radio"/> Conversations are about what members think and why: Members' ideas, beliefs, feelings are clear and explicit and open for exploration through group discussion <p>Learning Foci and Conversation (cont.):</p>	<p>Summary Evidence of Indicators</p>	<p>1) What needs to be done (include who takes action, and when it was or will be taken):</p> <p>2) What needs to be done (include who takes action, and when it was or will be</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="radio"/> Discussions centre on ways to improve student learning experience <input type="radio"/> A variety of theories around student learning and teaching, and evidence for or against them, are discussed openly <input type="radio"/> Existing presuppositions, knowledge and theories are questioned <input type="radio"/> Group members create their own problems and questions to guide their investigation around the topic <input type="radio"/> New theories are developed, as is a shared understanding <p>Monitoring and Impact:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="radio"/> Group members look for and work with new information around the topic <input type="radio"/> Innovative solutions are developed <input type="radio"/> Include new ways of sharing and interaction, and professional development related to the focus is available to members <input type="radio"/> Group members assess the strengths and weaknesses of theories <input type="radio"/> Group members improve ideas by generating more specific questions and searching for new information <input type="radio"/> Group members create new knowledge and understanding around the focus that differs from the initial knowledge and group's starting point <p>Contra-indicators (check all that apply):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="radio"/> The discussions reproduce or encourage existing processes in the PLC or school, rather than support new practices that are in line with the focus <input type="radio"/> Comments or conversations centre on external circumstances (work overload, students' characteristics, etc.) to explain the issues or experienced problems 	<p>Summary Evidence of Contra-indicators</p>	<p>taken):</p> <p>3) What needs to be done (include who takes action, and when it was or will be taken):</p> <p>4) What needs to be done (include who takes action, and when it was or will be taken):</p> <p>5) What needs to be done (include who takes action, and when it was or will be taken):</p>
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Formal and Informal Instructional Leadership: The Learning Foci Drivers

The following are types of general questions you, as the facilitator, can listen for, and foster during discussions around your PLC's leadership:

What kinds of changes have we noticed in classroom practice? Is there agreement among the PLC members or at the school site(s) around the focus? Are we seeing evidence of collaborative inquiry? Are deep conversations occurring among teachers and students? Are the teaching and learning practices making connections to the outside world and what the students need to learn and do? Are there multiple opportunities and roles for informal and formal leaders in this initiative? Do we have all the people who are impacted by, and have an impact on this initiative represented in the PLC?

Indicators and Contra-indicators	Evidence of the Indicators and Contra-indicators	Actions Taken Based on the Evidence
<p>Indicators are observables that suggest there is formal and informal instructional leadership for your PLC's focus/foci.</p> <p>Contra-indicators are warning signs that you may need to make adjustments to the instructional leadership around the focus/foci.</p>	<p>The evidence may be comments, discussions, happenings or specific actions taken in the PLC meetings, and/or at the school site(s), for example. Include a brief description of indicator (or contra-indicator) examples.</p>	
<p>Indicators of formal leadership (check all that apply):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="radio"/> Vision and focus development <input type="radio"/> Intellectual and material support provision: resources and time for staff to participate in focused professional learning <input type="radio"/> Responsibility for, and monitoring of school improvement process, and the work of the PLC around the foci <input type="radio"/> Involvement of whole school in the improvement process <input type="radio"/> Effects of challenges to the work of the PLC from the broader environment are minimized: formal leaders help keep the focus when other initiatives are being encouraged 	<p>Summary Evidence of Indicators</p>	<p>1) What needs to be done (include who takes action, and when it was or will be taken):</p> <p>2) What needs to be done (include who takes action, and when it was or will be taken):</p>

Appendix B
Interview Protocol

Research Project – Facilitating Professional Learning Communities

Facilitator Interview Protocol

Estimated interview time: approximately 45 minutes

Introduction

Interviewer thanks interviewee for taking the time to participate, and gives background on the research project: want a deeper understanding of the process involved in facilitating professional learning. Interviewer gives overview of the interview content: questions about the focus, collaborative inquiry, and leadership

Background

1. To begin with, please give me some background on yourself and your organization. Tell me about the [school/district] and the community it serves, and your roles in the [school/district].

Probe: Type of org: K-8/high school/district? Non-denominational/Catholic?
Located in an urban/rural community?

Probe: School community: student learning needs, student characteristics
Broader community: characterized as low income/multicultural?

What are your responsibilities in the [school/district]?

2. Tell me about your professional learning community.

Probe: As a facilitator, what is your role or roles in the professional learning community? What have you been doing as facilitator so far?

Probe: Who is in the PLC?

Probe: Tell me about the student learning needs. (if not answered in #1)

Probe: Where are you with your Professional Learning Community? Do you have an adult learning focus, and have you started any activities at your school that are related to the learning focus, for example? If so, tell me about them.

Probe: What are your next steps/actions with your PLC?

Probe: How long do you think this PLC will exist? Is there a timeframe for it?

Learning Foci

3. IF NOT ANSWERED BY Q2 PROBE 4: How would you describe your conversations around the focus?

Probe: Tell me about your PLC's focus.

Probe (BASED ON ISSUE IN ASSESSMENTS: BUY-IN): How would you describe each member's contributions to the discussion about the focus?

Probe: How would you describe each member's support of the focus? How do you know? Give some examples.

Collaborative Inquiry

4. Tell me about some of the conversations – or a typical conversation – you've had in your PLC.

Probe: What types of topics are discussed? If they relate to student learning and teaching, how?

Probe: Describe how problems or questions (without a specific answer? without an agreed-upon or known answer/solution?) are dealt with by PLC members.

Probe: How is information gathered and shared in the PLC?

5. How do you know your PLC work is having an impact?

Leadership

6. Who contributed/s to the PLC's focus development and in what ways?
7. If the focus has remained the same over the PLC's work, how has it been maintained over time?

Probe: Tell me a bit about the strategies that have been used.

Probe: Have other initiatives come up to compete with the PLC focus, and if so, how was that handled?

8. How do PLC members – and if other faculty members are also involved – get the information and resources related to the focus that they need?

Enablers and Challenges

9. What helps you to move the work of your PLC forward?
10. What makes it difficult for you to facilitate the work you and/or your PLC are doing?

Probe: Is there anything you need that you don't already have access to?

Probe: Are there any policies, practices or structures in your organization that impact your and the group's work in the PLC? (this could be an enabler as well)

Appendix C
Discussion Protocol

Problems of Practice Critical Friend Discussion

Introduction

Often, issues arise when facilitating PLC activities. Problems of practice challenge a facilitator's success in moving the work of the group forward. These are not the kinds of problems that will go away with time on their own; they need intentional strategies. This session activity is designed to give facilitators opportunities to talk with other facilitators from various contexts about a problem of practice they are experiencing in their PLC work, in order to gain a different perspective on their issue.

Getting Started

In this session, you will have time to work on two members' problems of practice as a group.

- 1) The group member whose first name is earliest in the alphabet will present first. The other members are the critical friends.
- 2) The group member to the left of the presenter will be the timekeeper.

Step 1: The Presenter gives an overview of the problem of practice (5 minutes or less)

The group member who is presenting spends 5 minutes (or less, preferably) giving a brief summary of the problem of practice and as many details of the PLC as necessary to give the responders enough background information to provide useful feedback.

The Presenter describes who is involved, what the problem of practice is and how it relates to the main indicator(s) (learning foci, collaborative inquiry, leadership) that enable impactful professional learning.

Step 2: The Critical Friends clarify the problem of practice and ask probing questions (3 minutes)

If necessary, the Critical Friends ask the four "W" questions to better understand the problem of practice:

- 1) WHO (is involved)?
- 2) WHAT (is the evidence of the problem of practice)?
- 3) WHERE (does the problem arise)? (Under what circumstances?), and
- 4) WHEN (does the problem occur)?

If necessary, the Critical Friends ask “I” questions:

- 1) IMPACT: Why is this issue a problem for you/your PLC? How does it affect the work of the PLC?
- 2) INTUITION: What do you think the other PLC members’ perspectives are, regarding the issue? What do you think some of the underlying issues may be for the other PLC members?
- 3) INITIATIVE: What have you done about the issue/problem up until now?

Step 3: The Critical Friends give feedback to the Presenter in a roundtable discussion (10 minutes)

When the Critical Friends give feedback to the Presenter, the Presenter needs to refrain from commenting on the feedback as much as possible. The Presenter’s role is to listen actively. Ideally, all Critical Friends who wish to will be able to respond to the Presenter and provide their perspectives on the problem of practice within the 10-minute limit.

The Critical Friends provide feedback in one or all of the three “R”s.

- 1) REFRAMING the problem

Is it possible to consider the problem in a different way? The problem of practice may need to be looked at from another angle.

What can be leveraged to help propel the group forward? Are there any “assets” that may have gone unnoticed?

- 2) ROUTING a plan of action

What are some considerations for ensuring progress? There may be other issues not specifically identified as part of the problem of practice the facilitator needs to watch for to make sure the PLC’s work progresses.

What has been done in similar circumstances to address the problem? There may be strategies that have worked well under similar circumstances, either in the Critical Friends’ experience or the experience of their colleagues. Critical Friends provide practical suggestions.

- 3) RESOURCES to address the issue

What can the Presenter use to inform the work on the problem of practice? The Critical Friends provide referrals to:

- Material resources: books, Internet sources;
- Human resources: other educators or community members who have expertise in the needed area; and
- Financial resources: funding opportunities for research and educational innovations, financial support from partnerships with community organizations.

When the first problem of practice concludes, the Presenter picks the second presenter if no one volunteers.