The Professional Teaching and Learning Cycle:

Implementing a Standards-Based Approach to Professional Development

By Ed Tobia

In a class I teach for prospective administrators, a student shared the story of one school where the principal announced that this year they were "doing" professional learning communities (PLCs). The principal gave everyone a book to read about effective instruction, told teachers when they were to meet, and let them self-organize to implement the book's ideas.

This example is not unusual. For some schools, the term "professional learning community" means getting groups of teachers together to talk about instruction, with little guidance about what they actually do or how to move from talking together to implementing changes in practice.

Guidance does exist but is too often seen as a way to get a group started through reading a book or hosting a workshop; professional learning resulting in application is minimal (Hord, 2004). In *Moving NSDC's Staff Development Standards into Practice: Innovation Configurations,* Roy and Hord (2003) provide an in-depth guide for designing and delivering quality professional learning opportunities. The authors discuss an underlying premise of the NSDC standards: "the day-to-day professional conversations focused on instructional issues . . ." form the basis for powerful professional development. Additionally, the terms "collaboration" and "collaborative" can be found in the description of almost every standard.

While this book provides many clues on what collaborative professional conversations about teaching and learning look like in practice, what teachers actually do when they come together to design lessons or talk about student progress varies greatly. Some teacher teams discuss books, some research ways to teach particular concepts, and others have wide-ranging discussions about the various challenges they face as teachers, such as lack of support from administration and parents, unmotivated students, or insufficient resources. In the work SEDL did from 2000–2005 to encourage schools and districts to work more systemically to improve student achievement, we encountered all of the above. It also became clear that almost none of the work teachers were doing when they met as a "PLC" resulted in any real sustained change in what happened in classrooms. What a waste of precious time for teachers. It's no wonder that we heard the refrain, "Just leave me in my classroom so I can get some work done."

Building on previous work on PLCs, lesson study, looking at student work, and standards-based instruction, SEDL staff developed the Professional Teaching and Learning Cycle (PTLC). The PTLC process begins when teachers look at student performance data from state assessments or locally developed benchmark tests aligned to state standards. The process comprises six phases that are played out during two collaborative meetings (see chart, p. 12). Ideally, groups of 2–8 teachers are gathered together for a period of 2–3 hours[1] to **study** the standards, **select** an effective strategy to address those standards, and *plan* an effective lesson using that strategy. Then those teachers return to their classrooms to **implement** the lesson. The same group of teachers reconvenes a few weeks later in a second collaborative meeting to **analyze** student work that was generated during the lesson and **adjust** their plans for future instruction accordingly.

The PTLC process is based on elements of research from both effective adult learning and effective instruction tied to increased student

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[1] For the first year or 2 of implementing the PTLC, 2–3 hours is recommended; however, when staff become more adept with the process and more comfortable with collaboration, meetings can be run more efficiently and require less time.

The Professional Teaching and Learning Cycle

Prior to beginning the cycle, a team of teachers examines student achievement data from state achievement tests or local benchmark tests aligned to the state standards and selects standards on which to focus.

Phase I: Study

Teachers work in collaborative planning teams (grade-level, vertical, or departmental) to critically examine and discuss the learning expectations from the selected state standards. Teachers working collaboratively develop a common understanding of the following:

- The concepts and skills students need to meet the expectations in the standards
- How the standards for a grade or course are assessed on state and local tests
- How the standards fit within a scope and sequence of the district curriculum

Phase II: Select

Collaborative planning teams research and select instructional strategies and resources for enhancing learning as described in the standards. Working collaboratively, teachers

- identify effective research-based strategies and appropriate resources that will be used to support learning that is aligned to the standards; and
- agree on appropriate assessment techniques that will be used to provide evidence of student learning.

Phase III: Plan

Collaborative planning teams work together to formally plan a lesson incorporating the selected strategies and agree on the type of student work each teacher will take into the Analyze phase of the PTLC to reveal evidence of student learning. Working collaboratively, teachers

- develop a common formal plan outlining the lesson objectives (relevant to the standards), the materials being used, the procedures, the time frame for the lesson, and the activities in which students will be engaged; and
- decide what evidence of student learning will be collected during the implementation.

Phase IV: Implement

Teachers teach the planned lesson, make note of implementation successes and challenges, and gather the agreed-upon evidence of student learning. Working collaboratively, teachers

- deliver the lesson as planned in the specified time period;
- record results, noting where students struggled and where instruction did not achieve expected outcomes; and
- collect the agreed-upon evidence of student learning to take back to the collaborative planning team.

Phase V: Analyze

Teachers gather again in collaborative teams to examine student work and discuss student understanding of the standards. Working collaboratively, teachers

- revisit and familiarize themselves with the standards before analyzing student work;
- analyze a sampling of student work for evidence of student learning;
- discuss whether students have met the expectations outlined in the standards and make inferences about the strengths, weaknesses, and implications of instruction; and
- identify what students know and what skill needs to be strengthened in future lessons.

Phase VI: Adjust

Collaborative teams reflect on the results of analyzing student work. Teachers discuss alternative instructional strategies or modifications to the original instructional strategy that may be better suited to promoting student learning. Working collaboratively, teachers

- reflect on their common and disparate teaching experiences;
- consider and identify alternative instructional strategies for future instruction;
- refine and improve the lesson; and
- determine when the instructional modifications will take place, what can be built into subsequent lessons, and what needs an additional targeted lesson.

achievement. It takes the recommendations from Marzano's (2001, 2003) work on classroom instruction and school factors that are closely related to student achievement (particularly the importance of having a guaranteed, viable curriculum) and puts them into an organized model for teacher development. The PTLC also models the behaviors suggested by the NSDC standards. The process

- encourages teacher collaboration;
- focuses on job-embedded learning;
- uses a systemic improvement strategy;
- ties learning to a set of standards; and
- monitors progress of teachers and students.

The PTLC process begins by introducing staff to the process, carving out sufficient time for teachers to meet during the school day, and pulling together the print resources necessary to support the work (student achievement data, state standards, curriculum documents). Teacher teams made up of 3–8 grade-level or content-area teachers must be established. Teams begin by examining student achievement data and selecting a state standard or a set of standards to focus on for the first cycle. Depending on the level of comfort teachers have with student achievement data or with taking time to really study the state standards, some professional development may be necessary before beginning.

One of the advantages of introducing the PTLC process is that it provides a way to focus professional development while allowing for individual differences. The PTLC is a professional development model in itself, but it also requires some targeted professional development for the teachers who are using it. Teachers need to be up-to-date on how to analyze student achievement data. They need guidance in studying and "unwrapping" the standards, in deepening content so they have a greater repertoire of teaching strategies to call on, in developing protocols for looking at student work, and in using multiple approaches to adjust instruction for students who have not mastered the standards they have taught. Providing professional development sessions in each of these areas creates a purpose for professional development that is focused on supporting the PTLC (see figure on p. 13).

The PTLC process itself is not revolutionary, but its structure provides some clear direction for teachers as they begin to work together to improve instruction. Introducing and initiating the structure of the PTLC, however, is not enough

Context for Change
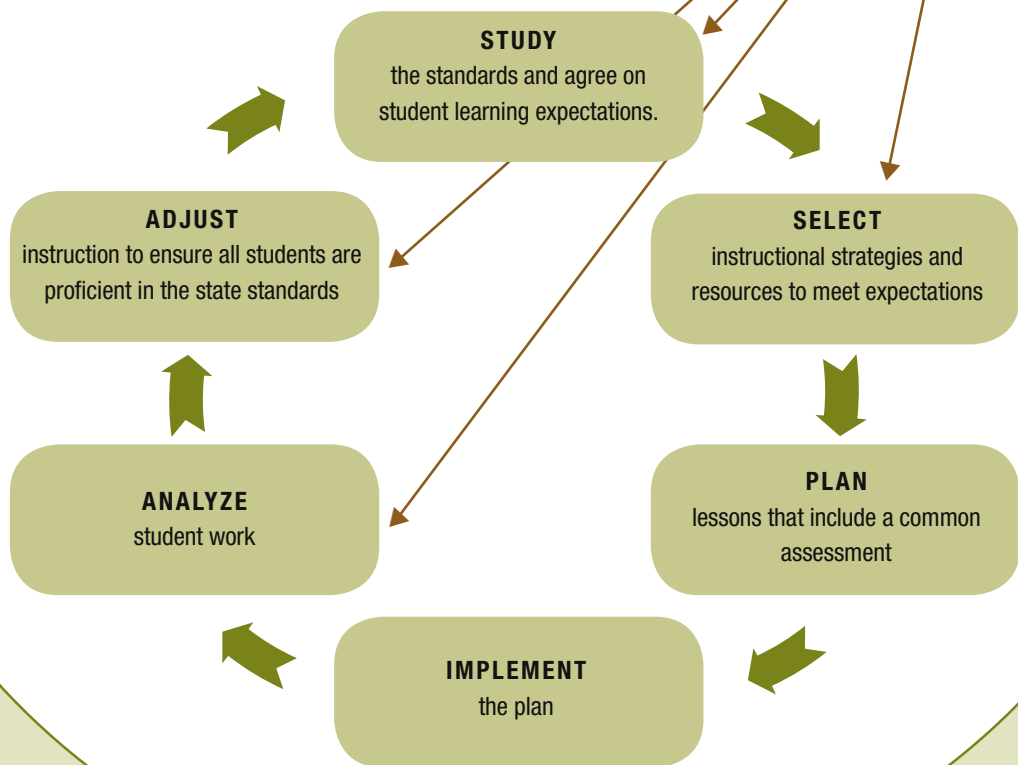
What teachers _do_ in a professional learning community

Focus on data

Focused Professional Development

PROFESSIONAL TEACHING AND LEARNING CYCLE*

Teachers collaborate to ensure instructional coherence

STUDY
the standards and agree on student learning expectations.

SELECT
instructional strategies and resources to meet expectations

ADJUST
instruction to ensure all students are proficient in the state standards

ANALYZE
student work

PLAN
lessons that include a common assessment

IMPLEMENT
the plan

*Adapted from the professional teaching model of the Charles A. Dana Center

Teacher collaboration is enhanced by a context of favorable conditions within the school:
- Safe and orderly environment
- Climate that promotes open, trusting relationships and collaboration
- Sense of urgency
- High expectations for staff and students
- Competent, caring adults
- Mutual accountability

Leaders can create the favorable conditions for powerful professional learning by:
- Creating an atmosphere and context for change
- Developing and communicating a shared vision for change
- Planning and providing resources
- Investing in professional development
- Checking progress
- Giving continuous assistance

to ensure that teachers use the process in a way that improves their classroom instruction and student achievement.

During a site visit to a high school, I watched in amazement as a group of algebra teachers (who met on their own time) struggled with how to teach a particular math concept well. They had developed their own Web site where they posted lesson plans they could each follow and had developed some common assessments. During this session, they were using the results of one common assessment to figure out why a number of students didn't get a particular algebraic concept and were struggling with how to teach that concept in such a way that all students would successfully apply it in practice. Two novice teachers were in the group, and I can only imagine the learning that was taking place, not to mention the modeling of what it means to be a professional.

During another site visit, I watched as teachers who had been provided with 2 days of professional development on PLCs met to collaborate on teaching their students to develop pre-reading skills. The conversation almost immediately turned to statements about individual students, general comments about parents, and complaints about the expectations being placed on them by administrators. The one area they were in unanimous agreement about was that they would be better off working in their own classrooms in isolation.

What made the difference between these two situations? It all came down to leadership—not only the leadership of the principal and the district personnel, but also that of teacher leaders with responsibility for creating the conditions in which the PTLC process can be successful. Leaders who hope to implement the PTLC must pay close attention to the implementation of the process. Researchers focusing on implementation have identified six key leadership behaviors, which are discussed below (Hord, 1992).

1. Create an atmosphere and context for change

The conditions in which teachers are working can be the difference between the successful implementation of the PTLC resulting in improved student learning or its inclusion in the vast burial ground of educational reform ideas. If teachers have had little opportunity to work on collaborative teams, simply giving them time, test results, a set of standards, and the charge to improve doesn't work. Sharing what they know about the standards and about instruction is risky business. If they know more than their colleagues, they risk being isolated as know-it-alls, and if the know little, they risk exposing their ignorance. Either scenario results in stifled meetings that soon lead to frustration with the process and eventual anger with those

Leaders must create a climate that promotes open, trusting relationships.

who initiated the change.

Leaders must help create a safe and orderly environment in the school. They must create a climate that promotes open, trusting relationships and collaboration among all staff members (Tschannen-Moran, 2004). Leaders hold high expectations for staff and students and pay attention to the concerns of teachers and students alike while holding everyone accountable for results. Finally, they model the behaviors they want to see in others, like attending professional development sessions and PTLC meetings to provide encouragement and support.

2. Develop and communicate a shared vision for change

When everyone in the school shares a sense of urgency about the need for improvement, there is greater likelihood of being able to have teachers implement the PTLC. Leaders work with all staff members to create a clear picture of what should happen in classrooms in order to achieve improved student learning. With that end in mind, the staff can then picture how they can work together to reach their goals. Leaders refer to this vision at every meeting and in every communication and make it clear that the PTLC is the kind of process that meets NSDC standards and can help focus the work of teachers rather than adding to it.

3. Plan and provide resources

In order for the implementation of the PTLC to be effective, leaders plan for the best use of time, personnel, materials, and fiscal resources to support the process. Teachers who have access to disaggregated data, the state standards for the grade and content they teach, and a scope and sequence that is aligned with the state standards have the easiest time using the PTLC. They also need sufficient time for collaboration and access to sources of information about research-based instructional strategies and assessment practices.

4. Invest in professional development

Too often, professional development sessions are offered away from the school and cover a wide variety of topics that may or may not address the needs of teachers or the students they teach. As mentioned earlier, professional development can be designed to support teachers in deepening their content knowledge and becoming more familiar with the use of data (including classroom evidence of student learning) to inform instruction. By focusing professional development and avoiding "one-shot wonders," the investment made in professional development has a greater long-term impact on classroom instruction.

5. Check progress

Once the PTLC is in place it is imperative to continually check with the teachers to see how it is going. The key questions are, "Is it helping you teach more effectively?" and "Is it making a difference with student learning?" Leaders visit classrooms frequently and gather progress information about the impact of the PTLC on teaching and student achievement both formally and informally. The data gathered provide information about what additional assistance or professional development may be needed and what adjustments need to be made to the implementation plan.

6. Give continuous assistance

When SEDL staff introduced the PTLC to a number of school districts, we found it invaluable to have someone with content expertise to work with teachers as they tackled the challenging job of studying the standards and developing a common understanding of effective instruction and assessment that supports students' mastering the standards. Based on the conversations, classroom visits, and formal assessments of teacher and student learning, targeted assistance must be made available to teachers through the focused professional development opportunities, on-site content and instructional assistance, and ensuring that necessary resources are available to support teachers implementing the PTLC.

The PTLC can be a powerful tool for helping teachers not only learn new strategies for helping students succeed but also implement and test those strategies in a community of learners who are focused on bringing state standards to life in the classroom. An assistant superintendent in Arkansas, Sally Bennett reported that for teachers in her district, using the PTLC has become a part of their routine. They meet collegially on a regular basis and talk about how their students are performing. She can see the evidence of their collaborative work from the "dynamics of what's going on in the classroom" when she makes her school visits.

The PTLC process is complex, and attention must be paid to the context in which it plays out and the support it needs to become a regular part of what happens in school. In a recent conversation, Michael Fullan said, "It's no longer OK for teachers to work in isolation. The new role for teachers is 'interactive professionalism.'" The PTLC is an excellent tool for helping teachers take on that new role.

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