WHAT YOUR COLLEAGUES ARE SAYING . . .

"This book reimagines the professional learning community as a dynamic space where educators leverage their collective expertise to brainstorm possibilities and generate innovative ideas. This book is grounded in the belief that educators are professionals in their field and empowers them to transform insights into actionable initiatives that drive meaningful change."

—Sarah D. Ortega, Instructional Coach,
Chula Vista Elementary School District

"PLC+ is a game changer for professional learning communities. Fisher and Frey provide a research-driven, equity-centered framework that empowers educators to collaborate with clarity and purpose. This book is an essential guide for teams looking to enhance student learning through collective efficacy and actionable strategies."

—Aida Allen-Rotell, Learning Technician and Co-Author of
PLC+: A Playbook for Instructional Leaders

"*Your Introduction to PLC+: Building Collaborative Teams That Drive Student Success* by Doug Fisher and Nancy Frey is a fantastic resource that enhances the work around teacher collective efficacy by providing collaborative structures to improve student learning. It also strengthens teacher and leader capacity through reflective practices and data-driven decision-making, making it an essential guide for professional learning communities at any level."

—Kim West, Corwin Faculty Member, former Kramer IB World
School Coordinator and Math Instructional Coach, Dallas ISD

"Finally, a PLC book that doesn't just rehash old ideas but actually makes them better. *Your Introduction to PLC+* bridges research and reality, delivering actionable strategies with an unwavering focus on equity. This book empowers teams, drives real impact, and elevates student success."

—Tyler Gilbert, Academic Coach, Calwa Elementary School,
Fresno Unified School District

"A must-read for all educators committed to continuous growth, impactful collaboration, and lasting impact in education. This book provides the essential strategies every team needs to collaborate effectively, maximize their impact, and drive meaningful student success."

—Olivia Amador-Valerio, Corwin Professional Learning Consultant and Author, Bilingual
Educator, Reading and Language Arts Specialist, Instructional Coach and Leader

"Believing in continuous improvement and improving are two different things. Closing this gap is exactly what this book does for teaching and learning. This groundbreaking resource reimagines how professional learning communities can drive meaningful change in our schools and classrooms. Fisher and Frey have beautifully designed a practical guide that goes beyond theory to deliver actionable strategies for implementation—boosting the collective efficacy of our communities. What sets this work apart is how it centers equity throughout the PLC process, ensuring that all students benefit from our collective efforts. This isn't just another education book to add to your shelf; it's a vital companion that will accelerate the

impact by enhancing how your team approaches collaborative work. If you're seeking to build a more responsive, equitable, and effective learning community, Fisher and Frey's work is absolutely essential."

—John Almarode, Professor of Education, James Madison University

"This book is a transformative approach to professional learning communities, grounded in liberatory design principles that remove barriers to learning and elevate teacher agency. By centering collaboration, inquiry, and collective responsibility, Fisher and Frey honor the expertise of educators as the key drivers of meaningful change. PLC+ isn't just another framework—it's a movement toward more just, informed, and impactful teaching that empowers both teachers and students to thrive."

—Kierstan Barbee, Professional Learning Consultant

"*Your Introduction to PLC+: Building Collaborative Teams That Drive Student Success—An Illustrated Playbook* is a must-have for schools that are seeking to experience immediate transformation of their teacher teams! The content of this playbook is designed to equip educators with the tools to foster growth and achievement for every learner, regardless of background or circumstance! Educators are given the opportunity to know how to measure the impact of their collective collaboration in real time with the multitude of job-embedded experiences and tools that are included throughout this publication. What has always been evident in the PLC+ model within this uniquely designed playbook format is HOW the authors provide teams the knowledge and skills to engage with each other to overcome challenges and produce intended outcomes through a commitment of unified ACTIONS! Another key feature of this book is the use of the *Liberatory Design approach* created by the National Equity Project. This approach is a cornerstone to elevating processes that guide the decision-making techniques of PLC+ teams through a dynamic cycle of improvement efforts that meet the diverse and evolving needs of schools. Since the inception of the PLC+ model six years ago, many educational communities have been transformed throughout the world and are embracing the results of growth in student and educator learning. With confidence, I know that the tools and experiences in this publication are sure to create many more school cultures that generate success for all!"

—Sonja Hollins-Alexander, Content Advisor and Scholar

"*Your Introduction to PLC+: Building Collaborative Teams That Drive Student Success* is an essential guide for educators looking to strengthen professional learning communities and improve student outcomes. Using a clear framework and practical strategies, this book empowers teachers and leaders to collaborate effectively to drive meaningful change in their schools. A must-read for anyone committed to fostering a culture of continuous learning and student success!"

—Toni Faddis, Former Principal and Corwin Author

YOUR INTRODUCTION TO PLC+

YOUR INTRODUCTION TO PLC+

BUILDING COLLABORATIVE TEAMS THAT DRIVE STUDENT SUCCESS

An Illustrated Playbook with 40+ Videos

DOUGLAS FISHER
NANCY FREY
Illustrations by **TARYL HANSEN**

CORWIN

CORWIN

FOR INFORMATION:

Corwin
A Sage Company
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320
(800) 233-9936
www.corwin.com

Sage Publications Ltd.
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP
United Kingdom

SAGE Publications India Pvt. Ltd.
Unit No 323-333, Third Floor, F-Block
International Trade Tower Nehru Place
New Delhi 110 019
India

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte. Ltd.
18 Cross Street #10-10/11/12
China Square Central
Singapore 048423

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 978-1-0718-7117-1

Library of Congress Control Number: 2025935540

Vice President and Editorial Director: Monica Eckman
Senior Director and Publisher, Content and Product: Lisa Luedeke
Content Development Editor: Sarah Ross
Product Associate: Zachary Vann
Production Editor: Nicole Burns-Ascue
Copy Editor: Beth Ginter
Typesetter: C&M Digitals (P) Ltd.
Proofreader: Sarah Duffy
Indexer: Integra
Graphic Designer: Gail Buschman
Marketing Manager: Megan Naidl

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

25 26 27 28 29 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CONTENTS

Visit the companion website at
https://companion.corwin.com/courses/PLC
for downloadable resources.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

PLC+ ADVISORY GROUP

Aida Allen-Rotell, MA
Bilingual Teacher
and Leader,
San Diego, CA

John Almarode, PhD
Professor of Education,
Richmond, VA

James Marshall, PhD
Professor of
Educational
Leadership,
San Diego, CA

Dominique Smith, EdD
Principal,
San Diego, CA

Marnitta George, PhD
National Board
Certified Teacher,
San Diego, CA

Tyler Gilbert, MA
Academic Coach,
Fresno, CA

Oscar Corrigan, EdD
Administator,
San Diego, CA

Sarah Ortega, EdD
Bilingual Teacher
and Leader,
San Diego, CA

Toni Faddis, EdD
Teacher and Leader,
San Diego, CA

Nicole Law, PhD
Teacher and Leader,
Indianapolis, IN

Sonja Hollins-Alexander, EdD
Teacher and Leader,
Atlanta, GA

Kierstan Barbee, EdD
Teacher and Coach,
Dallas, TX

Olivia Amador, EdD
Bilingual Teacher
and Leader,
San Diego, CA

Woo Williams-Zou, MA, JD
Senior Equity
Leadership Consultant,
National Equity Project
Oakland, CA

Kim West, MA
Teacher,
Dallas, TX

Tom Malarkey, MA
Director,
National Equity Project
Oakland, CA

INTRODUCTION

A professional learning community (PLC) is a structured, collaborative approach to professional learning in which educators come together regularly as a team to discuss and reflect on the evidence they collect from students and about their teaching practices with the goal of improving student outcomes. Unlike traditional, top-down professional development models, PLCs are driven by the teachers, who share a commitment to ongoing learning, mutual accountability, and the belief that every student can succeed. Effective PLCs give teachers the autonomy they desire and the level of professionalism they have earned.

Professional learning communities, which have existed for several decades, were originally designed to combat the teacher isolation that was common in the 1950s and 1960s. The idea was that teachers, working together, could positively impact students' learning; the groups would help ensure that the individuals working so hard to make that impact were connected with like-minded colleagues. This turned out to be a good idea, and today the evidence strongly suggests that professional learning communities can positively impact both teacher practice and student achievement.[1]

But—and this is important—these groups work only when done right. Over the decades, researchers and practitioners have learned more about what it means to implement effective professional learning communities. As the evidence has been assembled, processes, procedures, and protocols have been updated and revised. As needed, older practices were abandoned as newer practices were identified.

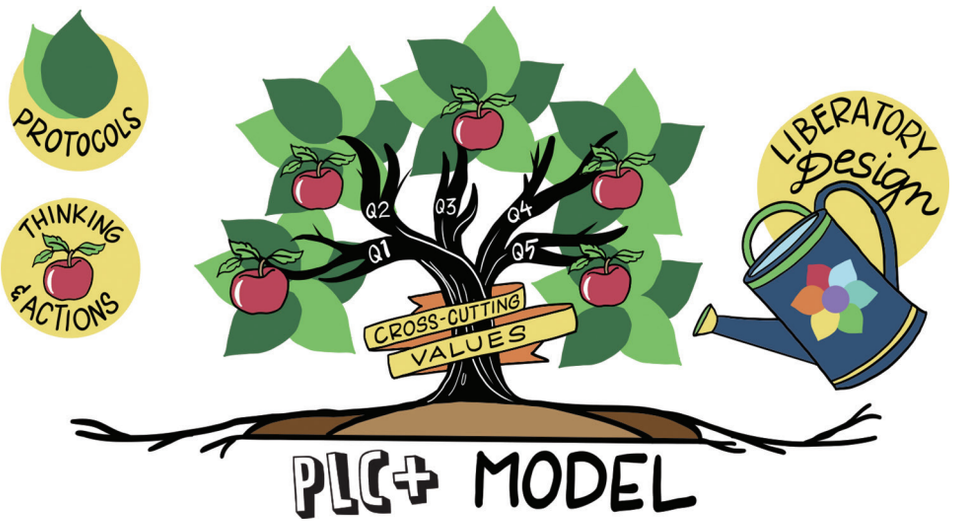
Enter PLC+, the next-generation professional learning community model designed to ensure that educators are connected with their peers and are impacting student learning in positive ways. This framework stands on the shoulders of the giants who went before us, yet it also reflects new evidence about learning communities that has been collected over the past decade. This book provides an introduction to PLCs in general and then takes a deep dive into an updated structure and system for ensuring that teacher teams are successful—an approach that we call PLC+.

As a high-level overview, PLC+ is fed by Liberatory Design.[2] Liberatory Design, originally developed by the National Equity Project and the K–12 Lab at the Stanford Design School (d.school), is both a process and a practice to address persistent inequities in complex systems in order to foster transformative change. In the PLC+ process, four crosscutting values serve as a foundation for the work that the PLC+ teams do: equity and fairness, high expectations, individual and collective efficacy, and activation. These values give rise to five guiding questions:

1. Where are we going?
2. Where are we now?
3. How do we move learning forward?
4. What did we learn today?
5. Who benefited and who did not?

Each of these questions also serves as the focus of a module in this book; the final module offers guidelines for how teams can work most effectively.

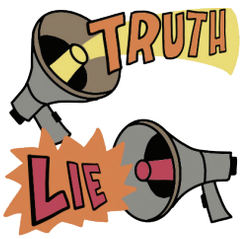
The questions explored in each of the first five modules inspire actions, and teams use protocols to accomplish their work. In other words, as PLC+ teams work together to seek answers to these questions, they generate a complex web of thinking and actions that improve the experience of schooling. A visual representation of this model is included below.



FEATURES OF THIS ILLUSTRATED PLAYBOOK

There are several design features, in addition to the illustrations, that are intended to increase your interaction with the contents. These features are consistent in each of the modules to allow you to develop habits as you interact with the information.

- An **Essential Question** frames each module to help build an organizational framework for processing the information.

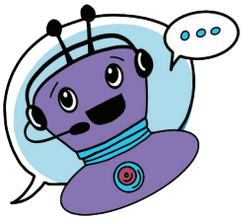


- **Two Truths and a Lie** near the beginning of each module allows you to consider several statements and then determine which ones are supported by the research and which one captures a common misconception. We invite you to return to these after reading the module to see if your thinking has been validated or extended.

- **The Story Behind the Question** provides information about why the key question is valuable to teams and the evidence that was used to develop and test it. Understanding the history of PLCs and the continued efforts to improve them, including ideas from the past that have not worked, is important for teams who want to take their work to the next level.

- **Liberatory Design**, an approach to transforming inequity in complex systems, grounds the PLC+ process and helps educators develop authentic and collaborative relationships that support redesigning negative systems, structures, and approaches that are reproducing oppression and contributing to inequitable outcomes and experiences. It builds on systems thinking and design thinking to ensure that discussions and decisions result in improved outcomes for all students.

- **Protocols** are included throughout this book to help teams engage in collaborative conversations. Protocols create structure, facilitate collaboration, and improve communication within teams. Over time, teams can adapt and revise the protocols to fit their specific needs.



- **Ask a Bot** provides advice on using generative AI as a teaching assistant or thought partner, saving teachers and teams time to focus on the needs of their students. The output from AI should always be reviewed for accuracy and usefulness. Remember, AI systems are biased due to the fact that they scrub content that was created by humans who have implicit biases.

- **Quick Starts** provide opportunities to reflect on the content, prioritize actions, and identify resources you may need. These sections are designed to help you and your team decide which steps can be taken immediately and which ones require additional thought, planning, or time.

- The **Case in Point** in each module offers a scenario and an opportunity to see educators working together to resolve a dilemma. These cases are designed to allow you to practice and apply what you are learning by considering the challenges in the related **What's Your Advice?** feature, which allows you to make recommendations based on what you have learned and experienced. You can also share your advice with your own team members and collectively determine the next steps you believe would appropriately support the people profiled in the case.

- A **Crosscutting Values Check** reminds you of the four values that are integrated into the PLC+ framework: equity and fairness, high expectations, individual and collective efficacy, and activation. In this section, we present some questions aligned with each of the values that encourage reflection and integration into your practices.

- **Self-Assessment** tools allow you to determine the strengths of your team and where you may want to focus additional efforts. Remember, teams are always on a journey, increasing their ability to work together to impact students' learning. As teams become more efficient, the impact that they have on students' learning will increase.

- **Notice and Reflect** appears at the end of every module and invites you to reflect on your learning and take actions of your own: What will you start, stop, and continue? It allows you space to scale your level of understanding so that you can keep learning after finishing the module. It also allows you to interact with colleagues and build your collective efficacy. As we have noted many times: The plus is YOU! You are a valued contributor to your students' learning, your own learning, and your team members' learning.

STRUCTURE OF THIS ILLUSTRATED PLAYBOOK

Following this introduction, we provide an overview module that is intended to build your background knowledge about professional learning communities. We review the history of this idea and its many iterations. In addition, we provide some distinguishing features of the next-generation PLC model: PLC+. Following the introduction, we turn our attention to the PLC+ framework guiding questions:

- **Module 1** focuses on the question *Where are we going?* This module provides information about analyzing standards to identify what students need to learn and be able to do. It includes information about organizing instruction in blocks of standards and how to ensure that students understand their learning journey.
- **Module 2** focuses on the question *Where are we now?* In this module, we argue that teams should pay attention to students' strengths and assets. They should collect evidence from students to identify what they already know so that they can design the learning journey.
- **Module 3** focuses on the question *How do we move learning forward?* This includes attention to instruction, which has been neglected in professional learning community conversations. Further, we note the value of teachers visiting peers' classrooms and talking about the evidence they collect to determine if their instructional moves are making a difference.
- **Module 4** focuses on the question *What did we learn today?* This is the assessment module and includes a number of tools educators can use to determine student progress toward competency. In addition, we focus on the learning of adults and how we can reflect on our efforts to ensure students' learning.
- **Module 5** focuses on the question *Who benefited and who did not?* This requires that we carefully consider the differential impact on students' learning and how we can address those differences. In addition, we note the value of removing barriers to students' learning and identifying needs for supplemental and intensive interventions.

- **Module 6** focuses on the structures and systems required for PLC+ teams to operate effectively and efficiently. Although it comes at the end of the book, as with any playbook, you can decide which move you need when. If your team wants to self-assess their efforts and identify strengths and needs, turning your attention to Module 6 would be wise.

Video 0.1
Introduction from Doug & Nancy
qrs.ly/hbghoa3

Again, this illustrated playbook is meant to engage *you* and your team. Please mark it up and complete the various tasks. The narrative in each module provides current and tested research as well as informed recommendations for practice for your PLC+. Enjoy!

NOTES

OVERVIEW

WHAT DOES A "PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY" MEAN, ANYWAY?

Teams of educators are powerful. When educators band together, work toward a shared goal, and collect evidence to determine their impact—even when faced with challenges—the results for students are spectacular. In fact, teams of educators are unstoppable whenever they believe they can accomplish each of the following:

- Change the trajectory of students' learning
- Collect and interpret evidence aligned with their goals
- Assume collective responsibility for their own learning and for the learning of their students

In the research world, this is called *collective teacher efficacy*, and it is one of the most powerful things educators can do to accelerate students' learning.[3]

Bandura invented the term *collective efficacy* based on his observation that a group's confidence in its abilities seemed to be associated with greater success.[4] In other words, the assurances people place on their team affects the team's overall performance. In Bandura's words, "Perceived collective efficacy will influence what people choose to do as a group, how much effort they put into it, and their staying power when group efforts fail to produce results."

When a team of individuals share the belief that through their unified efforts, they can overcome challenges and produce intended results, groups *are* more effective. For example, when neighbors share the belief that they can unite to overcome crime, there is significantly less violence.[5] In business, when team members hold positive beliefs about the team's capabilities, creativity and productivity increase.[6]

There are three core attributes necessary to develop collective efficacy:[7]

1. Each person needs to have confidence about their ability and disposition to successfully contribute to a task or accomplish an activity as part of a team (individual efficacy in contributing to the group).
2. Each person needs to have skills in working for themselves and working with everyone in a team (individual efficacy in the skills to work in a team).
3. Each person needs to have confidence or a shared belief in the team's collective capabilities to organize and execute the optimal course of action (individual confidence and skills in the potency power of them working in a group).

Collective efficacy can influence a group's behavior in several ways, including these:

- What they choose to focus on
- How much effort they put in
- Their staying power in the face of extended challenges

This is where professional learning communities came in, transforming isolated teaching practices of the 1960s and earlier years into collaborative, growth-oriented environments. PLCs are intended to empower educators to work together and share insights, strategies, and supports to address the specific assets and needs of their students. Importantly, teams of educators working in PLCs should foster a culture of continuous improvement in which teachers learn from each other, reflect on their practices, and make decisions to enhance student learning. PLCs offer a powerful, research-backed approach for building professional expertise and achieving meaningful, sustained impact in schools.

Video 0.2

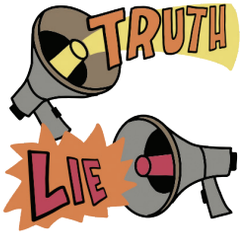
Doug explores collective efficacy

qrs.ly/mlghoa7

Essential Question

HOW CAN WE REFINE WHAT PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES ARE AND HOW THEY IMPACT ADULT AND STUDENT LEARNING?

TWO TRUTHS AND A LIE



Two of these statements are true; one is false. Can you spot the lie?

1. Professional learning communities have been around for such a long time that there is widespread agreement on what a PLC is.
2. Professional learning communities have the potential to raise student learning and student achievement.
3. Although professional learning communities are widely used in schools, teacher preparation programs rarely teach about them or make use of them.

Professional learning communities have been around a long time. However, an overreliance on passed-down traditions has resulted in a patchwork of practices that often do not result in the intended impact. In fact, one research group who conducted a systematic review of the literature on PLCs called it "a meaningless label" because of the lack of a universally understood definition of what it means to function as a learning community.[8] Consequently, the first statement is the lie.

The second statement, which is true, raises an important point: PLCs have the potential to positively impact student learning—but it is not a given.[9] Teams can be hampered by vagueness in their purpose, their goals, and the processes they use to achieve those goals.

Unfortunately, the third statement is also true. Nearly fifty years after PLCs were first introduced to the field, much of what they are and do still seems to rely more on local customs based on the school's culture (i.e., *this is the way we have always done things*) than on actual research, which is what should actually shape a school's professional culture. Further, it is uncommon for teacher preparation programs to discuss collaboration or host PLCs of preservice teachers.[10]

With all of this in mind, it is important to recognize that there is a growing body of evidence about effective structures and protocols that increase the impact PLCs have on students. Returning to the teacher isolation days of the 1950s and 1960s is not desirable, nor is attending useless meetings. Instead, we need to identify and implement what is known about effective PLCs to ensure that they have the intended impact.

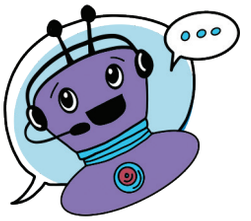
WHAT DEFINES AN EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY?

In an effective PLC, educators work together to analyze data, examine student work, and share effective teaching strategies, which creates a culture of continuous improvement within the school. The structure promotes open communication, fosters trust among colleagues, and encourages collective problem-solving, allowing teachers to grow professionally in a supportive and reflective environment. We love the following definition, which beautifully sums up the work of high-functioning, high-impact professional learning communities: "knowledge sharing, knowledge creation, the development of new practices and the joint trial and refinement of these practices."[11] Thus PLCs have two complementary purposes:

- Enhancing educators' skills and effectiveness
- Improving student learning outcomes

At the heart of every PLC is a focus on student learning. Team members work together to identify and address the specific needs of their students. PLCs often follow a cycle of inquiry, where teachers set learning goals, collect and analyze data, and implement targeted strategies based on their findings. Importantly, the adults also learn as part of this iterative process; educators continually assess and adjust their approaches based on the evidence gathered. Beyond improving student learning, PLCs aim to create a shared vision and set of values within a school, establishing norms for collaboration and accountability that strengthen the school's professional culture. In doing so, the PLC becomes a mechanism for aligning individual teachers' goals with the broader mission of the school, ensuring that everyone is working in unison toward the same high standards for students.

ASK A BOT



To help align the PLC goals to your school's goals, you might seek assistance from generative AI by using the following frame:

> Here are my school's goals for this year: [**INSERT SCHOOL GOALS**]. Do the goals for our PLC align with these school goals and reflect our core values, such as [**INSERT VALUES, SUCH AS *HIGH STANDARDS FOR ALL STUDENTS***]? Provide suggestions on how we can ensure alignment and strengthen the connection between our PLC goals and the broader school vision.

For teachers, the benefits of participating in a PLC are numerous and impactful. PLCs provide a space for educators to collaborate and learn from one another, breaking down the traditional isolation that often comes with teaching. By engaging in meaningful discussions and examining real classroom data, teachers develop a deeper understanding of effective instructional practices and gain new insights they might not have discovered alone. This collaborative approach also helps reduce isolation, as teachers feel supported by their peers and motivated by shared successes. Additionally, PLCs allow teachers to grow professionally by engaging in reflective practices that improve both their skills and their confidence. In a well-functioning PLC, teachers are empowered to take ownership of their professional growth and are better equipped to adapt to the challenges of a diverse, dynamic educational landscape, ultimately leading to a more engaged and effective teaching workforce. In fact, one of the major benefits of professional learning communities is that they can foster teacher agency.[12]

This last point is an especially important one. *Teacher agency* refers to the capacity of teachers to make intentional, autonomous decisions about their practice to best support their students' learning. It involves the ability to adapt, innovate, and take ownership of instructional choices, grounded in professional expertise and knowledge of students' needs. When teachers have agency, they feel empowered to contribute to school decisions, continuously improve their practice, and drive positive change in their classrooms and beyond.

Investigation cycles are essential because they serve as the drivers of professional learning communities. They provide a structured, continuous process for examining and improving teaching practices to enhance student learning. Through these cycles of inquiry, teachers collaboratively set focused goals, collect and analyze data, implement instructional strategies, and reflect on the outcomes. This iterative process allows educators to make data-driven decisions and adapt their approaches based on what is working or what needs adjustment.

Video 0.3

Nancy explores the impact of PLC+ on teacher agency
qrs.ly/l5ghoab

By engaging in regular investigation cycles, PLCs create a culture of continuous improvement where learning is constantly evolving based on evidence rather than assumptions. This approach not only builds collective expertise within the PLC but also fosters a deep sense of accountability and shared commitment to achieving the best possible outcomes for students.

NOTES

QUICK START

	I can start this tomorrow	I can begin this month	I need to discuss this with others	Resources needed
Ask others about the history of professional learning communities in your school or district.				
Reflect on any previous experiences you have had in professional learning communities. When were they effective and when were they not useful?				
Identify the ways that data and evidence of student learning are used in professional learning communities.				
Make a list of the "passed-down traditions" in your PLC and evaluate whether they align with the purpose and goals of a professional learning community.				

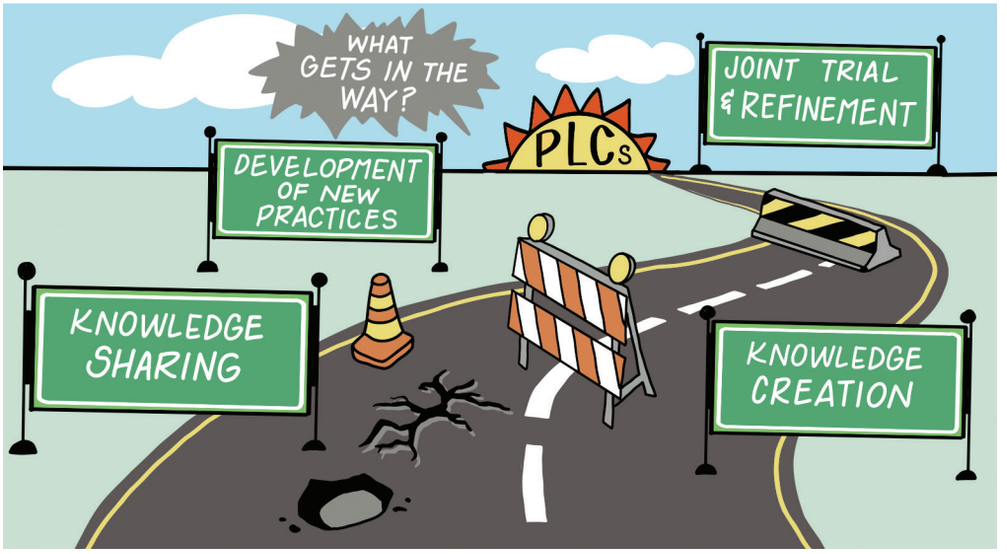
(Continued)

(Continued)

	I can start this tomorrow	I can begin this month	I need to discuss this with others	Resources needed
As a team, read the section "What Defines an Effective Professional Learning Community?" and collaborate to establish a shared understanding of what a PLC should and should not be.				
Review the core attributes necessary to develop collective efficacy. Identify specific ways you can contribute to fostering it with your team. For example, you might modify your language to emphasize team success (e.g., "We can solve this together") or encourage collaborative problem-solving when challenges arise.				
Take time to reflect on the collective success of your PLC team. Collectively acknowledge wins, such as implementing an instructional practice or using data to inform practice.				
Discuss examples of successful collaboration and analyze what made those moments effective.				

online resources Available for download at **https://companion.corwin.com/courses/PLC**

WHAT GETS IN THE WAY OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES?



Conventional practices regarding professional learning communities often stray far from what they were intentioned to do:

- Knowledge sharing
- Knowledge creation
- Development of new practices
- Joint trial and refinement of these practices

Instead, PLCs often operate as isolated teams, rarely (if ever) interacting or learning from other teams in their school. Even more rare are teams that operate among schools. Unfortunately, this silo approach prevents the formation of productive networks, which effective professional learning communities can actually foster. Before we continue, let's briefly examine some of the barriers that can prevent PLCs from working together as high-performing teams.

A LACK OF UNDERSTANDING ABOUT WHAT PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES ARE

In short, the professional learning community is the school: teams of teachers and leaders working synergistically. Teams operate within the school and contribute to the collective knowledge and practices of the entire community. Yet far too often the team acts as an isolated unit of analysis, not as a cohesive unit across the school. And, unfortunately, when teams are isolated from one another, innovation is thwarted, and the system is structured to maintain silos of excellence.

When teachers work together, they can reduce or eliminate the within-school differences in students' learning. An international study of science performance in sixty-eight countries reported that the variance (the spread between the highest- and lowest-achieving students) is far larger within a school than between schools. Of all the countries studied, the variance in US schools was among the highest, accounting for 80 percent of the differences (the international average was 69 percent).[13] Imagine the impact that this has on students' learning, especially those unlucky enough to be assigned teachers who have no peer support and who are trying their best to implement effective practices. This variation is simply not fair, and it results in differential impacts on student learning.

Marc Tucker, former president of the National Center on Education and the Economy, attributed this wide variation within schools partially to how schools are structured, with little opportunity for teachers to spend time in each other's classrooms working together in teams to solve problems, and with limited chances for new teachers to learn from experts in their own schools.[14] Without regularly scheduled events such as learning walks, without investigation cycles focused on joint trial and refinement of practices, and without school networks to share findings across the school community, change is left to chance.

A LACK OF CLARITY AND SHARED PURPOSE

When team members aren't aligned on goals or lack a clear vision for what they want to accomplish, their efforts often become fragmented. Without a common understanding of the purpose, each member may interpret the work differently, leading to varied priorities and a diluted focus. This lack of alignment can make it challenging to achieve a collective impact on student progress, as members pull in different directions or struggle to prioritize effectively. Schools that mandate a particular focus for the professional learning community, but fail to build a strong rationale for that focus, risk leaving teams in the unenviable position of going through the motions without true intention. Even worse, when the focus is vague and repetitive (e.g., "Our focus this year is on raising test scores in reading and math"), a hodgepodge of strategies is likely to emerge. And don't even get us started about the utter waste of waiting until the fall of the following school year to determine whether your actions resulted in a positive impact.

A LACK OF SUFFICIENT COLLABORATION TIME AND STRUCTURE

Teachers are already stretched thin with daily responsibilities, and without dedicated time for collaborative planning, analyzing data, and discussing instructional strategies, time use can devolve into a series of hurried check-ins rather than productive, reflective meetings. Additionally, without clear agendas or norms for collaboration, meetings may lack focus, leading to frustration among members who feel their time is not used effectively. A high-performing team requires dedicated time with purposeful structures in place to keep the work meaningful and aligned to shared goals.

CONFUSION ABOUT COOPERATION AND COLLABORATION

Shirley Hord's research highlights a critical distinction between teams that work cooperatively and those that work collaboratively. She uses this metaphor: "Dating is a cooperative venture, while marriage is a collaborative one."[15] Cooperative teams can be less successful than collaborative teams because their members may divide tasks and work independently, each responsible for a specific piece of the whole. Although they might come together periodically to share progress, cooperative teams often lack a deep, collective commitment to shared goals about student learning (versus simply getting some required tasks done). Members may focus on their individual successes and struggles, which are eventually combined, but their work remains largely isolated.

In contrast, truly collaborative teams engage in ongoing, interdependent work toward a common challenge. They build shared knowledge, examine data together, and engage in reflective dialogue, continuously adjusting their strategies based on insights from the group. Collaborative teams are committed to shared accountability for results, which means every member is invested not only in their own success but also in the success of the entire group. This level of collaboration fosters a stronger, more unified approach to improving student outcomes, as each member's expertise and insights contribute to collective progress.

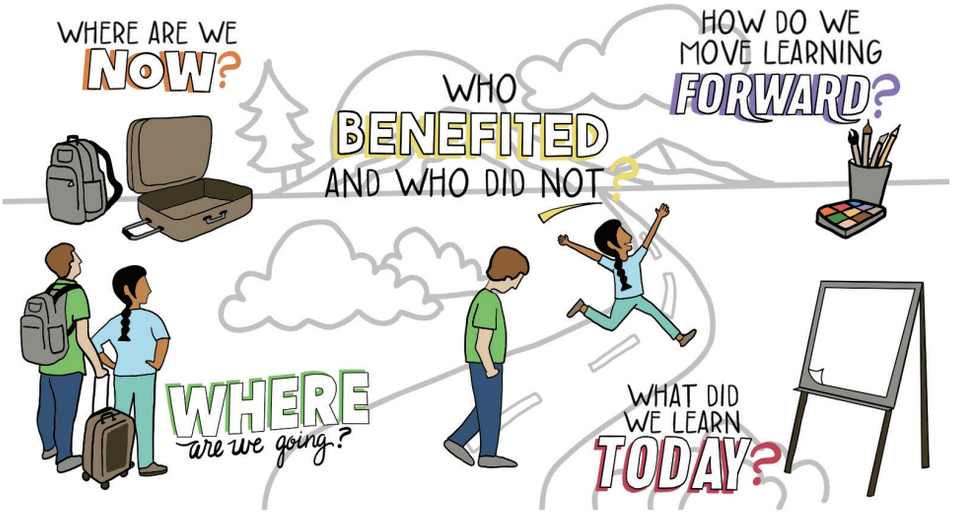
NOTES

QUICK START

	I can start this tomorrow	I can begin this month	I need to discuss this with others	Resources needed
Talk with colleagues to learn their perspectives about what gets in the way of a productive professional learning community. Does their feedback align with barriers discussed in this section?				
Identify the existing schedule for PLC team meetings. Name the current focus of your PLC team.				
Identify ways to optimize the use of collaboration time, such as using clear agendas and establishing norms for meetings.				
Reflect on your team's interactions with other teams in your school. Are there any opportunities to collaborate with other teams? Brainstorm ways to engage in cross-team sharing sessions.				
Review your current PLC goals and discuss how they directly align with student success. Are your goals clear enough to drive collective action? Consider revising them if necessary to focus on tangible student outcomes.				

online resources Available for download at **https://companion.corwin.com/courses/PLC**

WHAT SETS PLC+ APART? INVESTIGATION CYCLES



Investigation cycles, which are a systematic process for collecting, analyzing, and sharing evidence to help organizations improve, drive the PLC+ school. You may have noticed that we used the plural—investigation *cycles*—because effective professional learning communities are nimble and responsive. The common challenge your team chooses to pursue will influence how long a cycle should occur, but we recommend cycles of six to twelve weeks so that teams can learn, innovate, and replicate success quickly.[16] As we have suggested, waiting an entire school year to view state test scores to see whether the professional learning community is having an impact is simply too long. We don't have time for that. We teach with a sense of urgency, and we should collaborate with a sense of urgency, too.

As we have noted earlier, there are five iterative questions that propel each investigation cycle:[17]

1. Where are we going?
2. Where are we now?
3. How do we move learning forward?
4. What did we learn today?
5. Who benefited and who did not?

These questions—and the modules that explore them in this book—are nonlinear in the sense that they *do not* need to be completed in a lockstep fashion, with the first week devoted to the first question, the second week

devoted to the second question, and so on. In practice, elements of one or more of these questions emerge as teams move through the cycles. Each question encourages educators to focus on purposeful collaboration, adult-informed and student-centered learning, and evidence-based improvement strategies. These questions serve as a structured approach for teams to assess, reflect on, and refine their instructional practices in a way that directly supports student achievement. By using these questions thoughtfully, the entire professional learning community can stay aligned with their goals and ensure that their actions are data informed and responsive to students' needs. Let's briefly examine each question in more detail.

WHERE ARE WE GOING?

This question invites educators to focus on teacher clarity and establish clear learning intentions and success criteria for students. It emphasizes the importance of having a shared understanding of the intended learning outcomes for students, ensuring that everyone is moving toward a common target. By defining where students should go, the PLC creates a foundation for setting high expectations and aligning teaching strategies. This step also involves identifying key standards, skills, and knowledge that students are expected to develop, which allows educators to plan their lessons and assessments around a unified vision. Further, it prompts teams to calibrate their expectations, such that the activities, assignments, and assessments contain an appropriate level of academic rigor.

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

This question reminds PLCs to assess and reflect on the current state of student learning by analyzing data and student work. As a team, educators determine the students' starting points, strengths, and learning goals so that they can best make use of the learners' strengths and teach in the spaces between what students already know and what they need to know. Through data analysis, educators gain insight into individual and collective progress, allowing them to design future instruction and assessment to meet students' specific needs. Reflecting on current performance also helps teachers recognize any barriers to learning that may hinder students' progress, such as skill gaps or misconceptions, making this a crucial step in shaping effective interventions.

HOW DO WE MOVE LEARNING FORWARD?

Based on data from the previous question, educators select instructional strategies and interventions to bridge the gap between students' current abilities and the desired outcomes. This question encourages teams to explore, select, and implement evidence-based practices that have been shown to accelerate learning. It also provides a unique focus, especially compared to conventional models that overemphasize talk about curriculum and assessment,

leaving any discussion of instruction conspicuously absent. By focusing on actionable steps, members collaboratively identify instructional approaches that will provide enrichment, targeted support, and scaffolding. This phase includes implementing learning walks to share best practices and adjusting instructional plans based on ongoing formative assessments to ensure all students continue progressing.

WHAT DID WE LEARN TODAY?

This question encourages teams to reflect on the effectiveness of their actions and to adjust practices as needed. It allows teachers to reflect on their learning from peers during team meetings and from students as they collect and analyze evidence. Reflection is crucial for educators to examine the immediate impact of their instruction on student learning. By discussing what went well and where improvements are needed, teachers can make data-informed decisions to refine their teaching. Continuous reflection strengthens the professional analysis skills of experienced and novice educators and is another unique element of the PLC+ model.[18] Reflection enables teams to be more adaptable and responsive, ensuring that instructional practices are not static but evolve based on students' progress and feedback from the learning environment.

WHO BENEFITED AND WHO DID NOT?

This final question focuses attention on the differential attainment of students within the learning process. Keep in mind the evidence we mentioned earlier: Variance *within* a school is often greater than the variance *between* schools.[19] This question encourages teachers to examine the distribution of learning outcomes and to consider whether all students, particularly those from marginalized or underperforming groups, are advancing. By identifying which students may have been left behind, teams can identify barriers that hindered progress and prioritize interventions that support equitable learning opportunities. This focus helps educators to ensure that all students benefit from high-quality instruction and fosters both individual and collective efficacy for all members of the professional learning community.

Video 0.4
Doug highlights the investigation cycle
qrs.ly/fkghoaf

NOTES

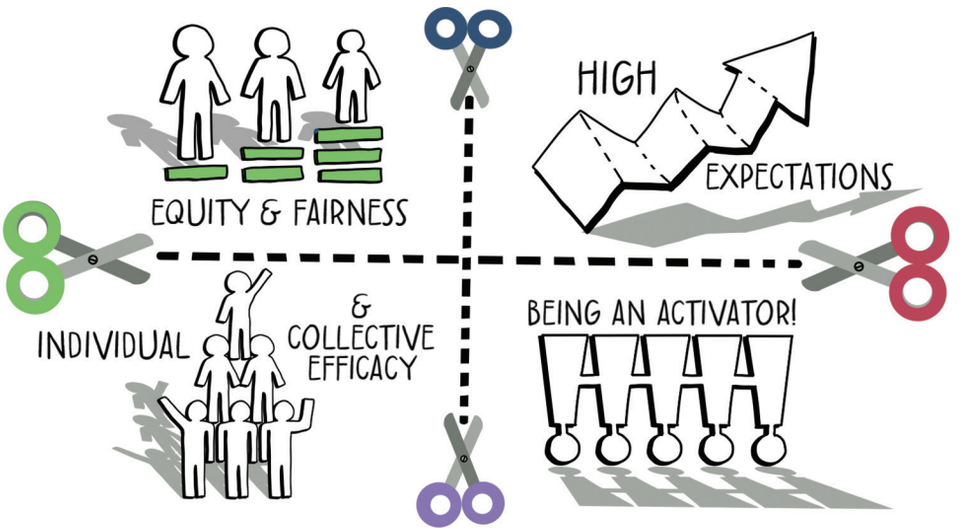
QUICK START

	I can start this tomorrow	I can begin this month	I need to discuss this with others	Resources needed
List the questions you currently use to drive your PLC investigation cycles and compare them to the five guiding questions used in PLC+.				
Consider how conversations about instruction are incorporated into your current PLC processes. Do teams discussed evidence-based practices?				
Ask your administrator about variance in test scores within your school. You may consider the variance within your grade level or school with others in the state or country.				
Consider dedicating PLC time to collectively writing or analyzing intended learning outcomes for students.				

	I can start this tomorrow	I can begin this month	I need to discuss this with others	Resources needed
Discuss any identified barriers to student progress, such as gaps in foundational skills or lack of engagement, and brainstorm strategies for addressing them.				
Analyze recent assessments and student work to determine current student performance. Identify trends, strengths, and areas needing improvement across the group.				
Reflect on the common instructional strategies your team has developed to support student learning. What shared research-based instructional moves are consistently used across PLC member classrooms? How do individual teaching styles shape the implementation of these strategies while still maintaining their research-based integrity?				

online resources Available for download at **https://companion.corwin.com/courses/PLC**

WHAT SETS PLC+ APART? FOUR CROSSCUTTING VALUES



Crosscutting values are essential throughout the investigation cycle because they provide a consistent foundation that guides every stage of collaborative inquiry and decision-making. These values—equity and fairness, individual and collective efficacy, high expectations, and activation—shape how PLC+ teams approach their work, ensuring that their efforts remain purposeful, inclusive, and focused on impactful outcomes for all students. By embedding these values into each step of the cycle, from analyzing data to implementing strategies, teams are more likely to create a unified culture that supports sustained improvement. These guiding principles not only influence what actions are taken but also inform the mindset and commitment each member brings to the table, fostering a supportive, results-driven environment where every student has the opportunity to succeed. Let's examine each crosscutting value in more detail.

EQUITY AND FAIRNESS

The value of equity and fairness is foundational in the PLC+ model, emphasizing the need for fair and just opportunities for every student. This value calls for teams to continuously examine and address disparities in educational access and outcomes. *Equity* is about acknowledging and removing systemic barriers, adapting teaching methods, and ensuring that every student—regardless of background or current level of performance—has the support they need to succeed. *Fairness* requires impartial and just treatment without favoritism. In other words, we have unconditional positive regard for all our students. Fairness does not mean giving everyone the same thing, but rather making decisions about what individual students need. By embedding equity and Liberatory Design into their practices, PLC+ teams are better equipped to make

fair decisions and engage in decision-driven data collection that prioritize all students' growth and learning needs.

HIGH EXPECTATIONS

High expectations are essential in establishing a culture of rigorous academic standards and mutual accountability. In the PLC+ model, high expectations extend to both teachers and students, with educators setting ambitious goals for student learning and maintaining confidence in students' ability to reach them. This value also drives team members to push one another toward growth, encouraging reflection and strengthening instructional practices. By holding high expectations, PLC+ teams create an environment where each student is challenged to excel and where teachers are committed to continually raising the bar. Importantly, high expectations paired with high support create an equitable learning environment and serve as the recipe for motivating young people.[20]

INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE EFFICACY

This third crosscutting value refers to the shared belief, supported by evidence of impact, that together teachers have the skills to positively influence student outcomes.[21] When educators have a strong sense of collective efficacy, they feel empowered to overcome obstacles and work toward meaningful change. This value encourages teachers to support one another in both challenges and successes, fostering a strong, unified approach to teaching. Collective efficacy strengthens the team's resilience, as teachers understand that their combined efforts have the potential to significantly impact students, bolstering their motivation and commitment to achieving shared goals.

ACTIVATORS

This last crosscutting value focuses on taking proactive steps to influence and drive collaborative practices among adults that improve student outcomes. Activators within a PLC+ setting actively seek out and implement strategies that help the team arrive at agreements, propose approaches, monitor progress, and adjust methods based on data and student needs. Each member of the team is an activator of each other's thinking, regardless of experience or expertise. By acting as activators, members support one another not only in making evidence-based instructional decisions but also in spreading innovation across the professional learning community.

Video 0.5

Nancy highlights the crosscutting values

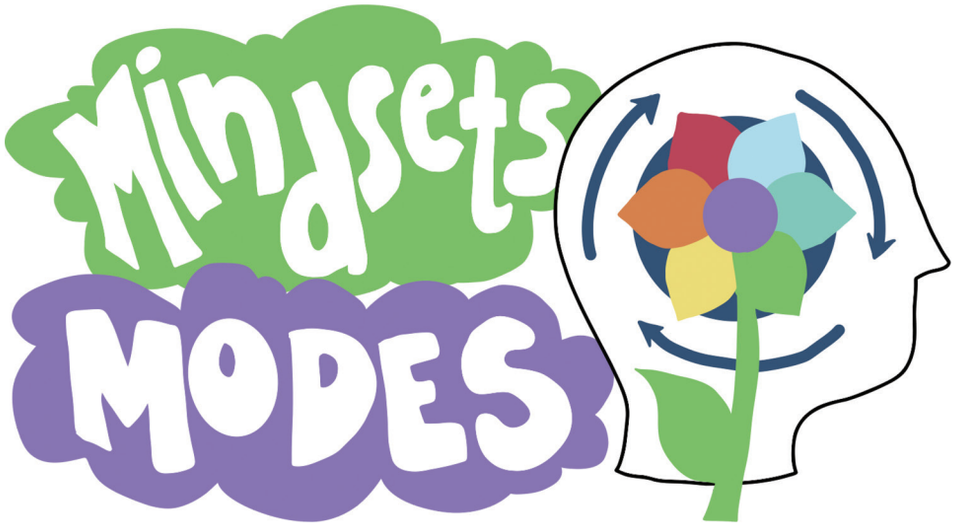
qrs.ly/cfghoah

QUICK START

	I can start this tomorrow	I can begin this month	I need to discuss this with others	Resources needed
Consider the ways in which your PLC delivers on the promise of equity.				
Discuss how high expectations are conveyed in the classroom.				
Describe the efficacy of team members and the collective.				
Explore the role of the activator and how team meetings are facilitated and monitored.				
Examine student data for disparities based on race, socioeconomic status, gender, disability, and other factors.				
Collaborate with a colleague with the intention of examining lessons for cultural responsiveness.				
Acknowledge and celebrate the progress made toward high expectations, both for students and for team members.				
Create a shared definition for what equity means at your site or in your PLC.				
Reflect on your role as an activator within your PLC. Think about the tools in your toolkit that you use to support collaboration and innovation. For example, consider what strategies you use to help your team arrive at agreements, even when perspectives differ. How do you encourage the team to explore and embrace new approaches? What approaches do you use to respectfully question long-standing practices or assumptions?				

online resources Available for download at **https://companion.corwin.com/courses/PLC**

WHAT SETS PLC+ APART? A LIBERATORY DESIGN APPROACH



Liberatory Design is both a process and a practice to address persistent inequities in complex systems in order to foster transformative change.[22] By merging the principles of human-centered design thinking with the principles of equity, this approach seeks to elevate empathy, creativity, and iterative experimentation to shift persistent patterns of inequitable outcomes and experiences. Its practice is grounded in a set of key mindsets intended to achieve the following:

- Support practitioners to explicitly and intentionally attend to trust and relationship building
- Attend to and shift power dynamics
- Recognize the ways that systemic oppression is operating in complex ways to produce inequitable outcomes

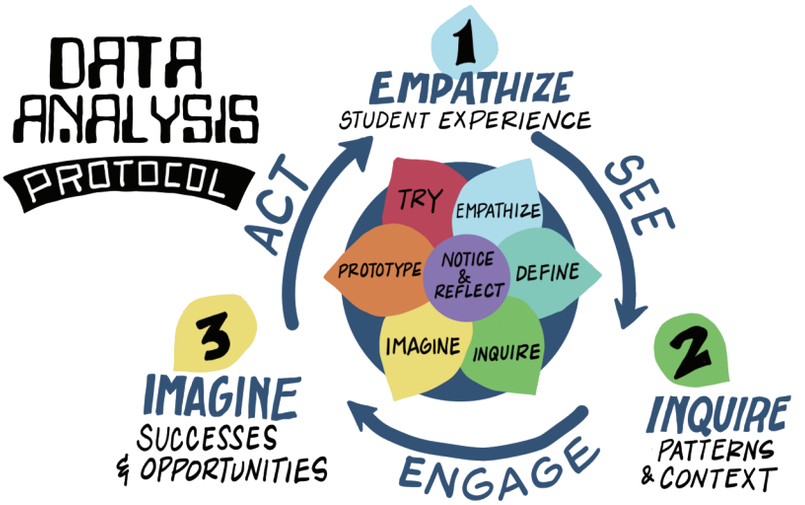
In centering liberation, PLC+ encourages educators not only to imagine new solutions but also to identify barriers that impede equitable access, participation, and outcomes—and then design approaches to overcome those barriers. The critical stances and process guidance offered by the Liberatory Design approach support PLC+ participants to (1) learn through doing, (2) partner with each other as well as with students and other community members, and (3) ultimately create the conditions necessary for collective liberation and create sustainable improvements.

There are three major components that comprise the Liberatory Design approach:

1. *Liberatory Design mindsets* offer stances and values that individuals and groups can invoke individually and collectively in their design, leadership, and collaboration to work toward liberatory outcomes.
2. *Liberatory Design modes*, depicted in the flower graphic on the next page, offer a variety of ways to guide and structure your group's design process.

It's important to note that even though the petals of the flower suggest a cycle, Liberatory Design is nonlinear and iterative. Your team can use these modes as needed in the context of your investigation cycle.

3. The *National Equity Project's (2024) Leading for Equity Framework*[23], which guides Liberatory Design, equips educational leaders to address complex, systemic inequities and take purposeful action to foster youth and community thriving.



Adapted from "Liberatory Design for Equity" by the National Equity Project. Derived from Anaissie, T., Cary, V., Clifford, D., Malarkey, T. & Wise, S. (2021). *Liberatory Design*. www.liberatorydesign.com.

At the heart of Liberatory Design are the modes of Notice and Reflect, which appear at the center of the flower. These modes provide an anchor for teams to recenter themselves throughout their work and to build greater self-awareness along with a capacity to shift how they're working.

Specifically, *Notice* helps PLC+ team members practice self-awareness and situational awareness:

- **Self-awareness**: Who are we as team (e.g., identities, experiences, history)? How are we doing (e.g., emotions, relationships)? What intentions do we want to bring to this next part of our work together? How might we need to shift how we're working together?
- **Situational awareness**: What is our context now? What has shifted? What feels important to anticipate?

Reflect helps PLC+ team members pause and adjust:

- **Pause**: Teams pause to reflect on our actions and equity impact, as well as our emotions and relationships.
- **Adjust**: Teams adjust our direction, our strategy, and/or how we're working together.

As shown in the figure, a key element of Liberatory Design is its emphasis on *empathize* and *define* practices. These practices prioritize relationship building and inquiry approaches designed to result in a deep understanding of the lived experiences of the people most affected by inequities—as well as the people who unwittingly contribute to the conditions and practices holding those inequities in place. Unlike traditional design thinking, which often centers on end users or clients, Liberatory Design emphasizes authentic engagement with communities. This approach requires teams to do the following:

- Actively listen
- Validate personal and collective experiences
- Ensure that the perspectives of those most impacted guide the process

Because this empathetic grounding allows for a more comprehensive and accurate identification of challenges, it helps your team develop solutions that genuinely address root causes rather than symptoms.

Another significant aspect of Liberatory Design is its iterative process, which combines creative ideation with critical reflection to ensure that your team's progress is in continuous alignment with equity goals. This reflection prompts your team to examine assumptions, question dominant narratives, and refine solutions based on learning with and from the impacted communities. The iterative nature of this model allows teams to remain adaptable, learning together and correcting course as needed. Adaptability is crucial for advancing student and adult learning because it encourages students and teachers to treat challenges as learning opportunities, and it encourages teams to refine their strategies to better serve the communities they aim to support.

In a PLC+ community, there may be imbalances of power between new and veteran teachers, BIPOC teachers and white teachers, and department leads and those without formal leadership positions. These imbalances impact who feels agency to speak up, who is listened to, which ideas get considered, and which ideas are disregarded. Liberatory Design's emphasis on cocreation and shared leadership further advances the PLC+ community efforts by encouraging groups to prioritize time and intention to create an inclusive environment where power imbalances and challenging dynamics are named and tended; this helps ensure that many voices have the opportunity to actively shape decision-making.

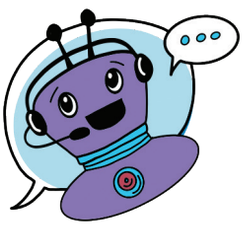
By decentralizing power in order to value contributions from all, the Liberatory Design approach promotes shared leadership and amplifies the voices of those who might otherwise be sidelined in traditional design processes. As a result, the outcomes are more representative, more innovative, and more effective as they draw from a broader range of insights and experiences, especially those of the people who are most impacted by the challenges being addressed. This collaborative framework ultimately empowers teams to address complex challenges in ways that are both empathetic and impactful.

Consider this example of a high school PLC using the Liberatory Design framework to guide their conversations after they observe unequal patterns of

participation during group projects in social studies classes. The team uses the Liberatory Design framework to take the following steps:

1. **Empathize Mode**: The PLC conducts empathy interviews with students, especially students who are most impacted by the challenges the PLC intends to address, asking them to share their experiences with group projects. They discover that some students feel their ideas are dismissed or overshadowed by peers, while others express a lack of confidence in participating due to language barriers or limited prior knowledge.
2. **Define Mode:** The team defines the problem as "unequal participation in group projects, caused by inequitable group dynamics and insufficient scaffolding."
3. **Ideation and Implementation:** The team decides to take action, discussing equitable participation goals with students and restructuring group tasks to include individual accountability.

Video 0.6
Overview of Liberatory Design
qrs.ly/coghoaj



ASK A BOT

Sometimes, despite our best intentions, we may overlook our own areas of unawareness. This can lead us to observe situations and unintentionally phrase things in ways that aren't constructive or that may cause harm. To approach challenges with greater empathy and understanding, consider using AI to help reform your group's observation. AI can help your team express issues in a way that avoids stereotypes and seeks deeper understanding. To begin, try using this prompt:

> We are observing [**INSERT ISSUE HERE, E.G., *PARTICULAR GROUPS OF STUDENTS ARE NOT APPLYING THEMSELVES OR ENGAGED IN LEARNING***]. Can you help us rephrase this issue in a more empathetic and solution-focused way? Additionally, suggest strategies or questions we can use to better understand the underlying causes from the students' perspectives.

NOTES

QUICK START

	I can start this tomorrow	I can begin this month	I need to discuss this with others	Resources needed
How do the PLC teams at your school see, engage, and act? Identify processes that are used to accomplish each of these.				
Consider the impact of systems thinking, through a Liberatory Design lens, on your colleagues and your students.				
Create opportunities for all voices to provide feedback during key decision-making moments. Use anonymous surveys, independent writing before sharing, or rotating leadership roles to encourage participation from all voices.				
Create a space for both individual and group reflection on how inclusivity and shared leadership are being practiced.				

(Continued)

(Continued)

	I can start this tomorrow	I can begin this month	I need to discuss this with others	Resources needed
Pay attention to the power dynamics that play out in your team meeting. Ask yourself questions like these: What patterns do I see with regard to who speaks and who doesn't? How do our meeting structures, locations, and processes support shared power or reinforce imbalances of power? Are all perspectives valued? Are we living up to our commitment for shared decision-making?				
During family conferences or other family engagement opportunities, ask family members these questions: What are your values? How do these values connect to the goals you have for your child this year? What is the most important thing you hope they achieve during this phase of their schooling? What is happening at school that is supporting accomplishing this? What is happening at school that is blocking this?				
Commit to listening to diverse voices—including students and families—when making key decisions about teaching, learning, and equity initiatives. Incorporate structures and processes that cultivate conditions for those from nondominant cultures to authentically participate and collaborate on key decisions.				
Work collaboratively to identify and list the groups whose perspectives should be included to ensure equitable and informed decision-making.				

Available for download at **https://companion.corwin.com/courses/PLC**

WHAT SETS PLC+ APART? THE COMMON CHALLENGE

Shared goals drive the actions any team takes, whether it is competitive (e.g., winning the soccer match) or collaborative (e.g., gaining market share in the third quarter). In education, the shared goal, broadly, is to improve and accelerate student learning. But without fully understanding existing barriers and strengths, it is nearly impossible for teams to determine what actions will remove those barriers and leverage those strengths. Liberatory Design offers process guidance to help teams identify common challenges and envision new, liberatory realities to work toward.

Specifically, the Liberatory Design mode labeled *define* helps teams develop a point of view about the needs of the community and the common challenges that must be addressed to meet those needs. PLC+ teams identify a common challenge by creating a statement about the community's current status, which serves to clarify exactly what problem the team will address. These statements are often the product of the first two questions in the investigation cycle: *Where are we going?* and *Where are we now?* Here are some examples of effective common challenges:

- Multilingual learners at our school tend to excel on the speaking and listening portions of the state's language assessment, but they often struggle with the reading and writing portions.
- Students' skills and habits in terms of study skills can be expanded.
- We want to strengthen our innovative technology usage in our teaching.

Notice all these common challenges are phrased as statements rather than as questions, and they are voiced in a way that identifies the present level of performance. Further, they are easy to remember, which improves clarity and commitment to the common challenge. Also note that these challenges aren't SMART goals, which often require several meetings to agree on and are frequently *given to* teachers rather than *developed by* teachers. SMART goals may also be created to cover an entire year, whereas common challenges focus on the current issue the team is facing.

When teams define a common challenge, they help ensure that discussions remain focused on student-centered outcomes rather than veering into general teaching practices or administrative tasks. This focus is essential because the primary goal of PLC+ is to improve student learning by analyzing and responding to data on student performance. When educators center their

Video 0.7

Nancy highlights the common challenge

qrs.ly/ctghoan

conversations around how well students are achieving specific goals, they can more effectively identify what instructional strategies are working and where adjustments are needed. Most important, this approach allows PLC+ teams to gauge their impact as they gather the evidence needed for the formation of each common challenge.

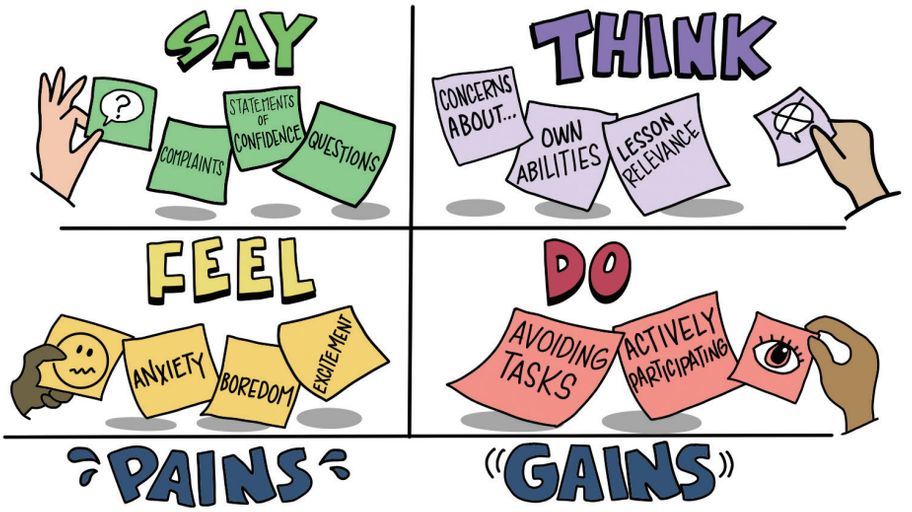
NOTES

QUICK START

	I can start this tomorrow	I can begin this month	I need to discuss this with others	Resources needed
Identify a common challenge that may serve to unite your team.				
Consider the difference between framing this as a SMART goal versus a common challenge.				
Practice rephrasing challenges as statements and not questions. Use concise, focused statements that clearly outline the current status of student performance.				
Review the shared common challenge your PLC has developed. Reflect on the clarity of the common challenge and whether or not the challenge provides a focused direction for your team's collaborative efforts.				
Bring relevant data to your next PLC meeting. Collaboratively analyze the data and identify the progress made toward meeting the common challenge.				
Reflect on how a student's entire school experience impacts academic outcomes. What are the factors that contribute to students' social and emotional well-being?				

online resources Available for download at **https://companion.corwin.com/courses/PLC**

EMPATHY MAPPING



The call for teachers to *empathize*, which is also one of the modes of Liberatory Design, asks educators to understand the experiences, emotions, and motivations of those who are most impacted by the challenges that educators are hoping to address. Engaging in empathy work allows educators to gain a rich understanding of the students and communities they serve. When done with intention and from a place of love, respect, and curiosity, empathy work can support educators, students, and other stakeholders to develop deeper levels of relational trust. While there are many different ways to empathize, we will highlight empathy mapping as an effective approach to help the school community gain a deeper understanding of their students' perspectives, emotions, and needs, which makes it especially valuable for professional learning communities who are working to improve instructional practices.

An empathy map is a tool developed at the Stanford d.school that visually represents what students say, think, feel, and do, allowing educators to step outside of their own assumptions and view learning challenges through the students' eyes. Empathy maps can highlight areas where students might be experiencing obstacles or frustrations, and they can uncover potential motivations and aspirations that can guide more student-centered instruction.

Using empathy maps in a PLC+ allows teachers to create a collective picture of their students' experiences, which is invaluable when interpreting data and planning interventions. Rather than only focusing on numbers and scores, an empathy map brings in qualitative insights that provide deeper context to quantitative data. These insights enable the team to identify and discuss strategies that respond to students' emotional and motivational needs, not just their academic ones.

To create an empathy map, team members first gather information from students, including informal interviews, about a particular topic that the professional learning community is interested in improving. Here are some examples of topic ideas:

- Ask students about a time when they felt success or when something was challenging. Ask them how they felt, what they did, and what they wished would have happened.
- Ask students about a sense of belonging in school. Ask them what it means to feel like you belong at school, and what the best and worst parts of that are. Ask them what suggestions they would offer to new teachers to help all students feel like they belong.
- Ask students what advice they would give to younger students.

Note that when empathy work is done poorly, it can feel extractive, tokenizing, and transactional. To avoid stumbling onto this negative path, teams should remain attentive to the power dynamics that can play out between teachers and students, which can be amplified when differences in race, gender, class, or sexual orientation are present. In particular, it is important for teams to take time to set intentions about how the educators doing the empathy mapping hope to be experienced by students and to generate ideas about actions that will support these intentions. When done well, empathy mapping and other empathy work will strengthen relationships and deepen understanding.

During the process of empathy mapping, the professional learning community gathers to share what students say, think, feel, and do in relation to the topic. They create a blank, four-quadrant map using the headings shown in the previous illustration and then they fill in the quadrants based on the students' responses to the empathy-based questions. For instance, in the quadrant with the heading "Say," teachers would share what students verbally express, such as complaints, questions, or statements of confidence. In the quadrants marked "Think" and "Feel," teachers explore what students might be thinking but not saying—perhaps concerns about their own abilities or the relevance of the lesson—as well as emotions such as anxiety, boredom, or excitement are documented. Then, in the section marked "Do," the team would document visible behaviors, like avoiding tasks or actively participating. The "Pains" and "Gains" categories on the map invite participants to note voiced or unvoiced concerns and hopes.

It is also a best practice for educators to circle back to the students who participated to share what the team learned from them. This inclusive approach invites students to also make sense of the data gathered, and it helps the team to check that their synthesis of students' perspectives feels accurate and in alignment with what the students hoped the teachers would take away. This is what it means to design *with*, rather than *for*, students.

Empathy mapping is a powerful step toward creating a more responsive, supportive learning environment. By actively considering students' thoughts,

emotions, and motivations, teachers can make informed decisions about a common challenge that resonates more deeply. This tool also fosters shared understanding and collaboration within teams and the entire professional learning community, as educators combine their insights to create a fuller picture of their students. In this way, empathy mapping encourages a shift from focusing solely on academic outcomes to seeing and addressing the broader context of student experiences, helping PLC+ teams build instructional practices that are both data informed and deeply empathetic. Through this process, PLC+ teams develop a well-rounded view of student experiences that might not be immediately apparent from data alone.

Video 0.8
Nancy discusses empathy interviews
qrs.ly/oqghoao

NOTES

COMMON CHALLENGE PROTOCOL

The common challenge protocol provides teams with a process to identify their why, or the reason that they spend time together. The common challenge helps teams find purpose in their work together, which is especially important for teams that have members teaching different age groups or content areas.

Purpose: To collaboratively understand and frame a common challenge based on community-defined needs, values, and a comprehensive view of student experiences.

Suggested Time: 45 minutes

STEP 1: Define the Common Challenge (20 minutes)

1. **Share and Reflect on Data (5 minutes)**
   - **Data Presentation:** Present both quantitative data (e.g., assessment results) and qualitative data (e.g., student feedback, observations).
   - **Contextual Inquiry:** Discuss the factors contributing to current outcomes, focusing on student engagement, inclusion, and system-wide patterns that impact learning.
2. **Collaborative Sense Making (10 minutes)**
   - **Identify Needs and Patterns:**
     - Use storytelling and perspective sharing to identify patterns in data and uncover root causes.
     - **Guiding Question:** "What core needs or challenges do students express, and how might these reflect broader patterns in our system?"
   - **Expand the Problem Definition:**
     - Discuss how the challenge might impact different student groups, and frame it to capture diverse needs.
   - **Guiding Questions:**
     - "How has this challenge been shaped by our current structures?"
     - "Who benefits or is disadvantaged by this system, and what are their experiences?"
   - **Document Reflections:** Summarize insights from the discussion to capture a holistic view of the challenge, prioritizing needs that reflect both shared and unique student experiences.
3. **Formulate the Challenge Statement (5 minutes)**
   - Draft a concise challenge statement that reflects the team's understanding of student needs and includes perspectives on accessibility, engagement, and growth.
   - **Example:** "Students generally are not feeling engaged or inspired by the work they are assigned, and they want more opportunities to interact with peers in their learning."

STEP 2: Inquiry Into the Challenge (25 minutes)

1. **Identify Gaps in Understanding (5 minutes)**
   - **Map Out Uncertainties:** Each team member reflects on aspects of the challenge they feel uncertain about or wish to explore further.

- **Guiding Questions:**
  - "What do we still need to understand about the student experience regarding this challenge?"
  - "Are there any assumptions about student needs we should examine?"

2. **Inquiry Planning (10 minutes)**

- **Explore Safe-to-Fail Actions:**
  - Brainstorm small, low-risk activities that could reveal more information (e.g., piloting a survey, conducting empathy interviews).
  - Focus on methods that encourage student input and support team learning.
- **Design Questions for Investigation:**
  - **Example:** "What barriers do students identify as impacting their engagement in this area?"
  - **Example:** "How do students and families feel this issue affects their school experience?"
- **Document Inquiry Actions:** Create a list of specific inquiry steps, and assign roles, ensuring each team member's perspective is valued in the discovery process.

3. **Debrief and Reflect (10 minutes)**

  - **Sense-Making Discussion:** As a team, review findings, focusing on insights that reveal more about the underlying dynamics of the common challenge.
  - **Challenge Statement Reevaluation:** After discussing findings, revisit and refine the common challenge statement if needed.
  - **Plus/Delta Feedback on Inquiry:** Gather reflections on what aspects of the inquiry process were helpful and what adjustments could improve future cycles.

Quality Checklist for the Common Challenge

- ☐ Is the common challenge we developed consequential to students, teachers, and/or families? How do we know?
- ☐ Is it stated in observable and measurable terms?
- ☐ Do the members of the team have a shared understanding of the common challenge? Do those most impacted by this challenge agree with how we have defined the challenge?

Video 0.9

A team works through the Common Challenge protocol
qrs.ly/lyghoau

A COMMON CHALLENGE WITH LIBERATORY DESIGN MODES

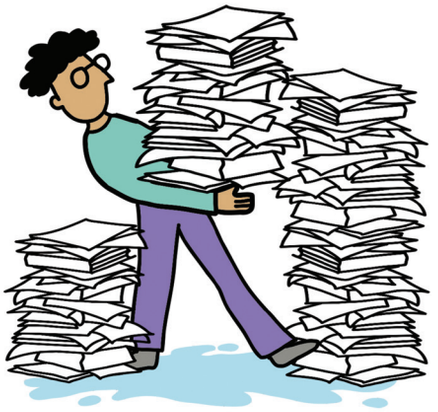
As we've noted, the Liberatory Design mode labeled *define* helps teams identify the needs of the community and the key challenges they must address in order to meet those needs. This approach is used whenever teams have gathered sufficient data for their investigation to make decisions about where they will focus their efforts for the investigation cycle. This data are usually the product of the first two questions: *Where are we going?* and *Where are we now?*

This common challenge protocol is designed to aid teams in discussion and decision-making. As with all discussions, yours may vary a bit from the suggested protocol, and that's fine. Further, as your team tries on different strategies to address the challenge and learn from their implementation, you may find that you need to fine-tune the original challenge statement later in the cycle. The key is to always keep in mind the overall purpose of the common challenge: Clearly define the problem and work toward consensus.

Liberatory Design offers a mindset that is essential when discussing the quantitative and qualitative data used: "Share, don't sell." We all have perspectives we are especially passionate about, which means we can err by trying to convince others of the value, rather than inviting them into the process of being collaborators.[24] By staying open to others and avoiding becoming too attached to our ideas, we allow room for the refinement and incorporation of new ideas. As organizational productivity expert Edward Deming noted, "Every system is perfectly designed to get the result that it does."[25] If we want to change the trajectory of student learning, we must be open to multiple perspectives.

The common challenge protocol with Liberatory Design modes is intended to provide time and space for teams to do the hard intellectual and social/emotional work of ideation and creation. Far too often, schools take an all-too-common approach of "ready, fire, aim," which undermines school improvement efforts by rushing to action before the team can take time to consider what problem we are really trying to resolve. In contrast, the protocol offers a process that supports teams to thoughtfully define needs and challenges as well as identify areas that may necessitate deeper inquiry in order to surface the learning needed to effectively understand and address the challenges. The outline on the previous page is set up to show how teams might use the protocol to guide a forty-five-minute common challenge meeting.

CASE IN POINT: A SHALLOW WADE INTO DATA WATERS



The eighth-grade PLC team at Pin Oak Junior High sat around a table in the library, stacks of student data sheets and notebooks scattered across the surface. Sarah Clarkson, the eighth-grade science teacher, sighed as she looked over her notes. Then she admitted, "It just feels like we're always talking about the same things. We identify areas where students struggle, but we never seem to get anywhere. We gather data, but I'm not sure we're really using it effectively."

James Washington, the math teacher, nodded in agreement. "I know what you mean. We talk about proficiency scores and gaps, but we're not really digging into why those gaps are there. It's like we're only scratching the surface. And we only seem to hear from a few of us in these meetings. I feel like we need a new approach if we're really going to help our students."

"Exactly," replied Mia Rodriguez, the English teacher. "We keep saying we want to make things better for everyone, but we don't even know what 'better' looks like for some of our students. I've been thinking about how to bring in more of their voices, maybe get a better sense of their needs beyond test scores." She paused, glancing around the room, and then added, "What if we tried to focus on understanding their experiences instead of just their performance?"

Sarah leaned forward, intrigued. "That might be exactly what we need. Maybe instead of just analyzing the numbers, we could try to understand more about what's driving those numbers."

What's Your Advice?

- How can this team move from simply reviewing data to understanding the root causes of student learning struggles?
- What steps could the team take to make their meetings feel more productive and less repetitive?
- How can the team balance the need to address proficiency gaps with a broader approach to understanding student needs?

Video 0.10
An activator reflects on the case in point
qrs.ly/kqghoaz

CROSSCUTTING VALUES CHECK

What is the current status of the professional learning community in your school? Consider these reflective questions to spark discussion with colleagues.

Equity and Fairness

- What processes do we have in place to understand who is benefiting and who is not benefiting from our instruction? How are these processes working for us?
- How do we learn about our impact on all students, including those with disabilities, multilingual learners, and advanced learners?
- How do we interrogate variance with regard to student performance and outcomes? What do we attribute to students' personal characteristics? Are these justified?

High Expectations

- How strong are our practices in relation to adherence to grade-level content?
- In what ways do we demonstrate high expectations of all students, including those with disabilities, multilingual learners, and advanced learners?
- How do we support and encourage one another as colleagues? How do we encourage risk-taking in service of learning?

Individual and Collective Efficacy

- How do we uphold high expectations for ourselves in terms of belief about our ability to positively impact the learning of all students?
- What supports are regularly utilized by all teachers (novice, experienced, and expert) to ensure continued professional growth?
- How do we make space to share our learnings with the broader school community and engage the work of other PLC teams?

Activators

- How do we ensure that any and all members are encouraged and supported to be activators, not just the person with the most seniority or highest position?
- Does our team include a range of professionals, including special and general educators, so that we can benefit from different perspectives?
- How do we understand the difference between collaborating and cooperating? What indicators do we see of collaborating on our team? What indicators do we see of cooperation on our team?

SELF-ASSESSMENT

Use the following five statements, one per essential question, for rapid assessment. Read the question and corresponding statement, and then discuss your current state with your PLC+ team. Come to a shared agreement about the current capacity and implementation for each statement.

1. Notice: Where Are We Going?

   We define our expectations through learning intentions and success criteria, and these definitions involve learning progressions over time, moving to the point of equity of access and opportunity for learning for all students.

1	2	3	4	5
Not Begun or Not Initiated	Very Limited Evidence of Capacity	Some Evidence of Capacity	Evidence of Capacity and Limited Evidence of Effective Implementation	Evidence of Capacity and Demonstrated Effective Implementation

. Reflect: Who is "in the know" about our expectations? How have our processes made space for students, families, and educators to co-construct and/or understand these expectations? What do we believe about how much these groups should contribute to defining our expectations?

2. Notice: Where Are We Now?

   We collect and analyze evidence to understand our students, identify equity gaps, challenge bias, and define common challenges that unite our efforts and support collective efficacy.

1	2	3	4	5
Not Begun or Not Initiated	Very Limited Evidence of Capacity	Some Evidence of Capacity	Evidence of Capacity and Limited Evidence of Effective Implementation	Evidence of Capacity and Demonstrated Effective Implementation

   Reflect: What evidence do we collect? What does this evidence support us to see? What are the limitations of this evidence in supporting us to see the unique interests, skills, and talents that our students possess and opportunities to build from those assets in our work to support learners?

3. Notice: How Do We Move Learning Forward?

   We match evidence-based instructional approaches to defined learning needs, assess and increase our own abilities to deliver instruction, and use learning walks and microteaching to move learning forward.

(Continued)

(Continued)

1	2	3	4	5
Not Begun or Not Initiated	Very Limited Evidence of Capacity	Some Evidence of Capacity	Evidence of Capacity and Limited Evidence of Effective Implementation	Evidence of Capacity and Demonstrated Effective Implementation

Reflect: How do make decisions about instructional moves? In what ways do we learn from others about effective practices? How do we draw from Black, Indigenous, and other minoritized and marginalized communities to learn culturally responsive and relevant instructional approaches? Do we believe that we can benefit from these perspectives?

4. Notice: What Did We Learn Today?

   We regularly examine our practice, discuss expectations, identify and act on student needs, and seek to describe elements of our practice that yield, or do not yield, a measurable, positive impact.

1	2	3	4	5
Not Begun or Not Initiated	Very Limited Evidence of Capacity	Some Evidence of Capacity	Evidence of Capacity and Limited Evidence of Effective Implementation	Evidence of Capacity and Demonstrated Effective Implementation

Reflect: How do we understand student needs? What processes do we have that support students to articulate their needs and provide feedback about how our curriculum and pedagogy meet their needs? How do students know we've heard them?

5. Notice: Who Benefitted and Who Did Not?

   We intentionally seek to identify patterns that suggest barriers to learning, monitor progress and achievement for all students, and modify instruction using strategies that include tiered systems, new approaches to instruction, and heightening collective efficacy.

1	2	3	4	5
Not Begun or Not Initiated	Very Limited Evidence of Capacity	Some Evidence of Capacity	Evidence of Capacity and Limited Evidence of Effective Implementation	Evidence of Capacity and Demonstrated Effective Implementation

Reflect: Whose voices have been invited to seek patterns? What might we learn from engaging paraprofessionals, after-school staff, students, and families if we invited them to help identify patterns? What fears or reservations might we be holding in inviting these perspectives? What structural barriers need to be addressed in order to engage these groups authentically?

Available for download at **https://companion.corwin.com/courses/PLC**

NOTICE AND REFLECT

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How can we refine what our professional learning communities are and how they impact adult and student learning?

THINK ABOUT

- Are we satisfied with our current professional learning community scheme?
- Do we learn from each other as a professional learning community, or is wisdom siloed?
- Are our efforts fair and equitable?
- What are our current strengths, and where do we need to grow?

START – STOP – KEEP

Based on what you learned in this module, answer the questions below.

Start: What practice(s) would you like to start doing?
Stop: What practice(s) would you like to stop doing?
Keep: What practice(s) would you like to keep doing?

WHERE are we going?

1 WHERE ARE WE GOING?

There is some joy in wandering. Perhaps we're sauntering through a park, letting the road take us on a journey. Or we're out for a bike ride, mountain climbing, or strolling through a mall and window shopping. In these cases, the experience is the journey, and we get to encounter things that we may have missed if we were hyperfocused on the destination. But at some point, we want to go home, so we have a clear destination. Consequently, our focus hones in on the efficiency of accomplishing the goal of arriving home safely in as little time as possible.

The learning that occurs in our classrooms often has a clear destination articulated in the standards and curriculum. There may also be prescribed steps and time constraints, including the urgency to ensure that students learn all that they can. Yet we can reconnect to the joy of wandering by remembering that Liberatory Design is about both the journey (process) and the destination (outcomes). En route to the learning destination we may encounter barriers, setbacks, delays, or unexpected complications, but even if we have a few paths to choose from, the learning goal remains constant. We don't alter or differentiate these outcomes. Instead, we focus on the learning journey and the supports required to ensure that students reach the goals. Even if setbacks and delays arise, we remain focused on efficiently and effectively designing the learning journey for students to arrive successfully and safely at their destinations. while preserving the joy of discovery along the way.

Essential Question

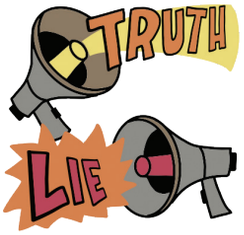
HOW CAN TEACHER TEAMS IDENTIFY THE LEARNING JOURNEYS OF THEIR STUDENTS?

Video 1.1

An elementary team discusses question 1
qrs.ly/5qghob2

Video 1.2

A secondary team discusses question 1
qrs.ly/6vghob3



TWO TRUTHS AND A LIE

Two of these statements are true; one is false. Can you spot the lie?

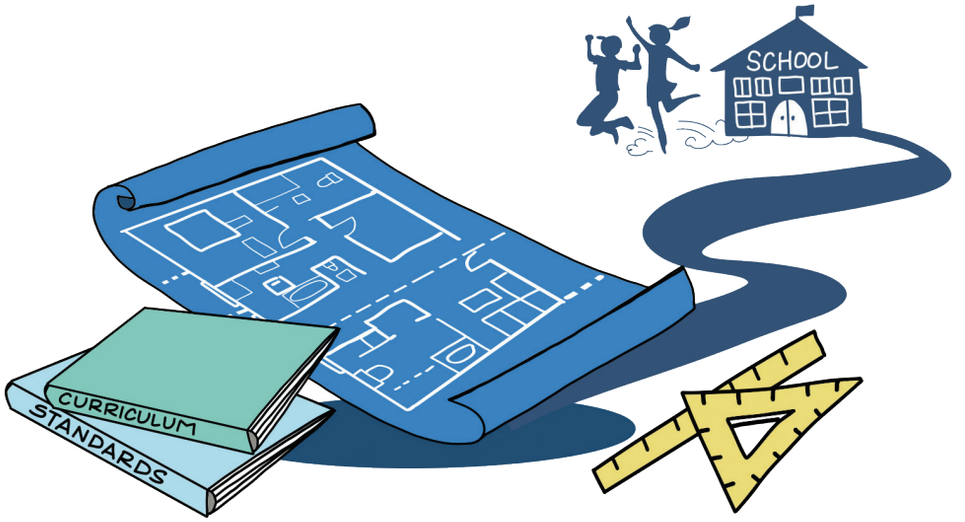
1. Teacher teams should decide what they want students to learn.
2. The learning journey for students needs to align with appropriate grade-level expectations.
3. The foundation for PLC+ is teacher clarity.

Professional learning communities existed long before there were standards. For example, prior to 1997, when the California State Board of Education adopted standards for what every student should learn in every grade, teachers or school systems decided what students needed to learn. As a result, there could be widely different experiences between different classrooms in the same school. PLCs could not have meaningful conversations if each educator was teaching different things, so the logical first question was to agree on what students would learn. Today, however, the content standards reflect what our society has agreed students need to know and be able do to. Consequently, the first statement is the lie. Teams should spend their energy focused not on what students should learn but rather on what the next step in the learning journey will be as students reach proficiency on the standards.

The second statement is an important distinction. In the past, education was very developmentally focused. Teachers taught at their students' current proficiency levels. But teaching a sixth grader the third-grade standards based on their current performance will produce a seventh grader who is ready for fourth grade. Instead, teachers design lessons that provide students access to the thinking and expectations of the grade-level standards and ensure that scaffolding and support make the learning comprehensible. Schools that are able to change the trajectory of students' learning—contributing on average more than one year of learning for each year students are in school—consistently focus on teaching students the appropriate, grade-level standards.[26]

The third statement is also true. Teacher clarity is foundational to the work that teacher teams do. In fact, teacher clarity is the *what* while PLC+ is the *how*. Teacher teams work to understand the standards and develop clarity in terms of the organization of learning; the examples, explanations, and practice offered to students; and the ways in which assessment evidence is collected, analyzed, and valued.[27] As part of this process, teams examine learning progressions and define what successful learning will look like each day for an instructional unit. Teacher team discussions focus on achieving clarity by understanding the expectations of the standards, organizing learning, refining examples and explanations, designing meaningful practice opportunities, and determining how to collect and analyze assessment evidence.

THE STORY BEHIND THE QUESTION (WHERE ARE WE GOING?)



As we have noted, older versions of professional learning communities focused on what students would learn, and teacher teams negotiated among themselves about their goals for students. This led to significant differences in the experiences students had and the eventual success that some students demonstrated. Simply said, it wasn't fair for some students to experience teachers who had lower expectations for their learning and others to have higher expectations.

In fact, teacher expectations play an important role in students' learning.[28] Teachers who have high expectations believe that the students they teach will make accelerated growth, not simply "normal" progress. Teachers with lower expectations assign tasks that are less cognitively demanding, spend time repeating information over and over again, focus on classroom rules and procedures rather than learning, and accept a lower standard of work.

Learning to analyze the standards—which we will also discuss in this module—helps teachers understand the expectation for the grade level and content they teach. And when teachers do so in the presence of their peers, they are much more likely to consider the ways in which they can ensure students access the grade-level expectations. When teachers deeply understand the standards, including the skills and concepts contained within the standards, they can design learning experiences and evidence collection systems to monitor students' progress toward the learning goals.

Consequently, the story behind this question allows teachers to deeply understand the curriculum expectations and standards and thus internalize the expectations articulated in these documents. Although many school systems

have adopted high-quality instructional materials (HQIMs) that are designed to provide a scope-and-sequence that is evidence-based and standards-aligned, the research[29] suggests that teachers spend a significant amount of time mixing and matching instructional materials. In fact, teachers spend about seven hours per week searching for materials and an additional five hours per week creating their own content.[30] If these are aligned with grade-level expectations, the time might be well spent, but "the caliber, rigor, and any rational sequencing of that material both within and across grade levels becomes a matter of luck and chance."[31] In contrast, when teachers and teams deeply understand the standards, they are more able to streamline their already adopted curriculum.

Video 1.3

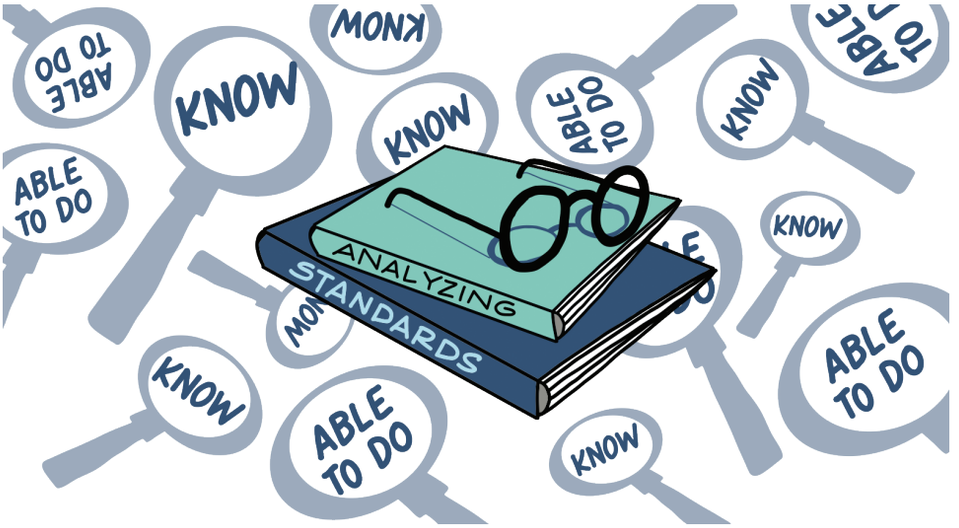
Nancy discusses the ideas behind question 1

qrs.ly/m4ghob5

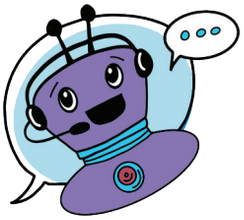
To ensure that students have access to HQIMs, teams need to be clear on the expectations for grade-level instruction of the standards, analyze those expectations, and then ensure that the materials they put in front of students meet the standards for quality. In districts that have formally adopted HQIMs, it is still important that teachers understand the standards so that they can interpret the evidence their students produce to determine when students have met the expectation or if the learners need additional supports to be successful.

NOTES

ANALYZING STANDARDS



Academic standards indicate what students should know and be able to do in each grade level and content area by the end of the school year. Academic standards are the result of negotiations in a community and are decided upon by policymakers. Educators analyze the standards to identify the specific concepts and skills students need to be taught, which leads to the identification of the learning progression: what comes first, what comes later, and what is taught toward the end of the unit. There are likely many logical learning progressions that will ensure students' success, and there may be some learning progressions that introduce concepts or skills for which students need more background knowledge. Developers of instructional materials also engage in this process. However, because they do not know the specific students in a given class, they may over- or under-shoot the learning progressions, which is why it is important for teams to develop or analyze the learning progressions based on their understanding of the standards and their students.



ASK A BOT

For inspiration, you can ask your AI system to provide you with options for learning progressions. Remember, there is not one right way to progress through the learning. Considering options can spark ideas for the team. You might use the following prompt:

> We are planning a unit for _____ grade, with the goal of helping students master these standards: [**LIST STANDARDS**]. Can you suggest two different ways to sequence the learning progression for this unit? Each sequence should take a different approach or route but still lead to students achieving the same learning goals.

A common way of analyzing standards is to focus on the concepts and skills contained within the standard. Generally speaking, the verbs and verb phrases describe the skills that students must develop, whereas the nouns and noun phrases identify the concepts that need to be learned.[32] This analysis helps teachers understand the type of thinking required or the depth of knowledge needed for students to be successful. For example, some standards focus on one idea, while others focus on several ideas. And still others focus on how ideas relate to one another or how ideas can be extended. Let's look at an example from fifth grade.

Standard	
Use place value understanding to round decimals to any place.	
Concepts (nouns):	**Skills (verbs):**
place value	use
decimals	round
place	

This simple analysis identifies the areas of content that students need to learn to be successful. As the teacher, you're on the lookout for students' understanding of these concepts and skills, which guides the development of instructional events and assessment opportunities.

As you probably noticed, the concepts (nouns) are fairly straightforward. But the skills (verbs) are a bit more complex. What does it mean to *use* when you are a fifth grader? How is that different from other grade standards that also use the word *use*? To maintain high expectations, teachers need to be clear about the skills students need to develop and the level of depth that is required by grade level. These make for great conversations with your colleagues.

There are several major cognitive moves that students must make to develop mastery of the standards (see Figure 1.1). Identifying the cognitive moves can help you and your team, but you still have to decide if you have high expectations for students in that particular grade level. Again, what does it mean to *use* at the fifth-grade level? As it turns out, that is a hard question to answer and one that plagues test makers. It's an estimation, not an exact science. But to ensure that students' learning leaps rather than lags, it's important to focus on the skills (verbs) and the depth of knowledge implied by the standard as a whole.

Figure 1.1 • Organization of Verbs in Standards

Add to: combine, deepen, improve, incorporate, integrate, introduce

Arrange: arrange, list, organize, sort

Big picture: comprehend, contextualize, orient, understand

(Continued)

(Continued)

Collaborate: contribute, engage, interact, participate, share

Compare: associate, categorize, classify, compare, connect, contrast, differentiate, discriminate, distinguish, link, match, relate

Create: accomplish, achieve, build, compose, construct, create, develop, draft, form, generate, initiate, produce, publish, record, stimulate

Decide: choose, decide, select

Define: define, delineate, determine, discern, establish, exemplify, identify, interpret, label, locate, name, recall, recognize

Elaborate: broaden, derive, elaborate, enhance, expand

Evaluate: assess, check, critique, evaluate, judge

Execute: advance, calculate, conduct, compute, employ, execute, navigate

Explain: answer, articulate, clarify, communicate, convey, describe, explain, express, inform, narrate, present, recount, report, respond, retell, state, summarize, synthesize

Hypothesize: anticipate, approximate, conjecture, consider, estimate, experiment, explore, hypothesize, pose, predict, test

Infer: conclude, deduce, generalize, infer, reason

Measure: gauge, measure, quantify

Metacognitive: appreciate, attend, design, monitor, persevere, plan, prepare, reflect, self-correct

Problem solve: figure out, overcome, problem solve, resolve, solve, surmount

Prove/argue: argue, assert, challenge, claim, confirm, defend, disagree, justify, persuade, promote, prove, quantify, specify, support, verify

Pull apart: analyze, decompose, decontextualize, diagnose, examine, grapple, investigate, partition, probe

Redo: redo, repeat, reread, revisit

Reference: acknowledge, cite, consult, plagiarize, refer, reference, trace

Seek information: acquire, ask, capture, compile, detect, elicit, encounter, evoke, find out, gather, listen, note, notice, observe, question, request, research, search, seek, study

Symbolize: act out, chart, conceptualize, demonstrate, depict, diagram, graph, illustrate, imagine, map, model, represent, symbolize, visualize

Transform: accentuate, adapt, adjust, alter, apply, conform, convert, edit, emphasize, manipulate, modify, paraphrase, rearrange, refine, replace, revise, rewrite, shape, shift, simplify, strengthen, substitute, tailor, transform, translate, update

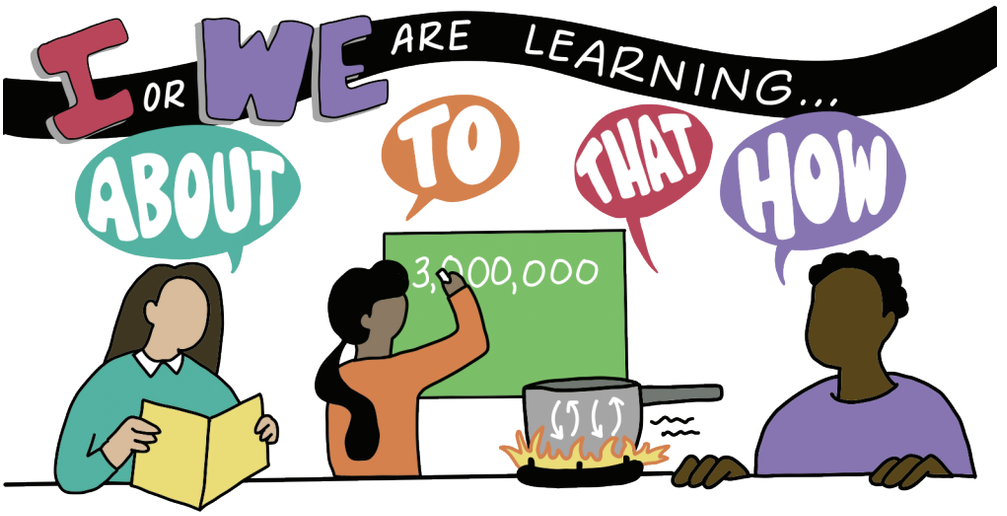
Adapted from *Vocabulary for the Common Core*, pp. 57–88, by R. Marzano and J. Simms, Marzano Resources, 2013.

QUICK START

	I can start this tomorrow	I can begin this month	I need to discuss this with others	Resources needed
Identify the standards that apply to your grade level and content area(s).				
Review the standards for an upcoming series of lessons to identify the concepts (nouns) within the standard.				
Review the standards for an upcoming series of lessons to identify the skills (verbs) within the standards.				
Analyze the instructional materials for the alignment with agreed-upon vocabulary and definitions from the identified concepts and skills within the standards.				
Develop or analyze the learning progression such that there is a logical flow of learning.				
Analyze how the standards for your upcoming unit build on those from the previous grade level and connect to the next grade level. Identify gaps and overlaps.				

online resources Available for download at **https://companion.corwin.com/courses/PLC**

IDENTIFYING LEARNING INTENTIONS



The standards identify what students need to know and be able to do at the end of the year. They represent the outcomes of the daily learning experiences that are designed and delivered. These learning intentions, learning goals, learning targets, or objectives are clear statements of the learning students will do on a given day in a given lesson.

Although teachers do not need to announce the learning objectives to students at the outset of the lesson, at some point during the learning process, students deserve to know what they are expected to learn. Learning intentions prime students about the learning to come and provide them an opportunity to reflect on their learning after the lesson. However, many teachers do not phrase the learning intention in a way that meets the true definition of the objective (which, we admit, is often written specifically for adults). Instead, teachers tend to introduce learning intentions with one of these general statements:

- I am learning [about, to, how, that . . .]
- We are learning [about, to, how, that . . .]

While these two statements convey to students the general topic or area of learning, they should be revised in such a way that they are accessible to students *while also maintaining the academic language of the standard*. In other words, learning intentions must be based on the analysis of the standards, and thus they must focus on the concepts and skills within the standards. Sample learning intentions include these statements:

- I am learning to generalize place value for multidigit whole numbers.
- I am learning how energy is transferred.
- I am learning about the ways authors introduce their ideas.

Each of these statements provides students an orientation to the learning experiences to come. Importantly, there is evidence that being clear about what students need to learn lessens the cognitive load on learners and increases their motivation to learn.[33]

QUICK START

	I can start this tomorrow	I can begin this month	I need to discuss this with others	Resources needed
Draft (or use a chatbot to draft) learning intentions.				
Sequence the learning intentions in a logical flow to develop students' skills and concepts.				
Revise the learning intentions for use next time based on students' response.				

online resources Available for download at **https://companion.corwin.com/courses/PLC**

CRAFTING SUCCESS CRITERIA

Success is motivational; it makes us feel good. And success reinforces learning. Yes, we can and do learn from failure, but it's more rewarding to learn from success. Success criteria make the destination clear to students and allow them to monitor their progress toward the learning intention, seek feedback as they engage in learning tasks, and self-assess their performance as they learn. In addition, clear success criteria make students feel safer during the learning process as they understand what is expected of them and how they will know that they have learned something.[34]

For convenience, we start success criteria in one of two ways:

- I can . . .
- We can . . .

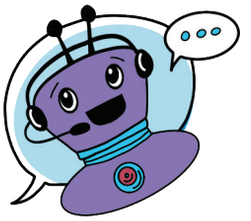
Of course, there are several ways to ensure that students know what success looks like, including rubrics, exemplars, modeling, and so on. Regardless of the format, the key is that students know what it means to have learned something. Ideally, there are several success criteria for each lesson. Even more ideal is an early win: Early in the lesson, students accomplish their first success criterion. In doing so, the reward pathway in their brain is fed neurotransmitters and feels good, thus encouraging learners to persist and obtain that same feeling again.

Let's say that a group of middle-school teachers agreed on the following learning intention: *I am learning about the way writers use figurative language*. The range of success criteria might include the following:

- I can identify the figurative language in a text.
- I can name the type of figurative language (e.g., simile, metaphor, alliteration, hyperbole, onomatopoeia, personification).
- I can explain what the figurative language means.
- I can identify the reason the author might have used the figurative language.
- I can use figurative language in my writing.

The first two statements are not really at the level of middle-school performance, but they are necessary prerequisites for achieving the others. Rapidly demonstrating success on the first two invites students to persist and figure out what the figurative language means. The last success criterion is beyond the expectations for middle school but seems like a logical extension for students as they begin to internalize an author's usage of this type of language.

ASK A BOT



Learning intentions and success criteria can be drafted by AI systems and then analyzed and improved by teacher teams. You might use the following frame to improve the quality of the output you receive from your chatbot:

I am a _____ grade teacher. We are focused on the following standard(s): [**INSERT STANDARDS**]. Develop learning intentions for ____ days in a logical flow so that my students develop their skills and concepts. Include the language of the standard and make the learning intentions accessible for my students. Based on this learning intention, [**INSERT LEARNING INTENTION**], develop _____ success criteria that include literal and conceptual understandings. Ensure that the language is accessible for my students. In the prompt, include the language of "I am learning . . ." for the learning intention and "I know that I have learned it when I can . . ." for the success criteria.

NOTES

QUICK START

	I can start this tomorrow	I can begin this month	I need to discuss this with others	Resources needed
Draft (or use a chatbot to draft) success criteria.				
Identify the types of evidence that need to be collected based on the success criteria.				
Revise the success criteria for use next time based on students' response.				

online resources Available for download at **https://companion.corwin.com/courses/PLC**

TEACHER CLARITY PROTOCOL

Analyzing standards helps teams internalize the learning that their students need to do. Deep understanding of the standards helps with the selection of instructional materials and with the development of tasks, assignments, and assessments. With practice, engaging in this teacher clarity protocol requires less of a time investment.

Purpose: This protocol helps teams analyze standards and develop learning expectations for students. In some cases, teams analyze the content of instructional materials to determine if the objectives are appropriate for students or if they need to be revised using student-facing language. If the instructional materials do not have success criteria, then teams develop those as well.

STEP 1: Identify Standards for an Upcoming Learning Unit

- Based on a list of standards taught at specific times of the year, agree on the standards that will be the focus of the unit. If there is an approved pacing guide, use the standards appropriate for the upcoming unit.
- List the concepts and skills from the standards. You can use AI to assist.
- Organize the concepts and skills into a logical flow of ideas and information. You can use AI to assist.

STEP 2: Develop Learning Intentions

- Draft and agree upon at least one learning intention per day for the length of the unit of instruction. You can use AI to assist.

STEP 3: Develop Success Criteria

- Draft and agree upon at least one success criterion per learning intention that focuses on the content being learned. You can use AI to assist.
- Draft and agree upon at least one success criterion per learning intention that focuses on the linguistic demands of the lesson. Consider the vocabulary students need to learn, the language structures they need to use, or the language functions they need to develop. This success criterion typically involves language production—the speaking or writing students will do to demonstrate their understanding. You can use AI to assist.

STEP 4: Decide How the Learning Intentions and Success Criteria Will Be Shared With Students

- Discuss the range of ways that learning expectations can be shared with students. Are they posted or printed for students? Do students have self-assessment tools that include the learning intentions and success criteria?

STEP 5: Identify the Relevance and Value of the Learning

- Discuss the ways in which teachers can share the importance, relevance, or value of what students are expected to learn. Note that there are many ways to hook students and ensure that they see the value of their learning.

Quality Checklist for the Learning Intentions and Success Criteria

Learning Intentions[35]

- ☐ Learning intentions are visible and usable for students.

(Continued)

(Continued)

- ☐ Learning intentions are discussed throughout the lesson.
- ☐ Students are given time to reflect on, ask questions about, and discuss the learning intentions.
- ☐ Connections are made to the learning intentions while students are engaged in the learning.
- ☐ Students are asked to monitor their progress using the learning intentions.
- ☐ Learning intentions are directly connected to the standard(s).

Success Criteria[36]

- ☐ Success criteria are visible and usable for students.
- ☐ Success criteria are shared and clarified with students during the learning.
- ☐ Success criteria communicate *I will know I have learned it when I can . . .* with specific parts or steps needed for success.
- ☐ Success criteria include worked examples, exemplars, or models for clarity.
- ☐ Students are asked to use the success criteria to self-assess learning progress.
- ☐ Students are asked to provide feedback to peers using success criteria.
- ☐ Success criteria are used to provide feedback to students.
- ☐ Each criterion for success moves the students incrementally closer to the learning intention.

Video 1.4
A team works through the Teacher Clarity protocol
qrs.ly/ezghob7

NOTES

TABLE OF SPECIFICATIONS

Typically, standards are not taught one at a time. Instead, they are bundled into units of instruction that last several weeks. It is often more efficient for teams to plan at the unit level with many standards taught so that they can devote other team meeting times to other PLC+ questions. One way to consider the ways that standards fit together is through the development of a table of specifications.[37]

A table of specifications is a more sophisticated way of analyzing standards to identify the knowledge and skills required. The table includes the academic terminology required of the standard, as well as the facts, rules, principles, processes, and procedures. These are usually found in the concepts from the standards. In addition, the table of specifications includes the translation or transfer skills, application, and analysis or synthesis required, which are generally found in the skills of the standards. Once done, teams can use the table of specification to accomplish the following:

- Identify the amount of instructional time required to develop students' understanding of each aspect of the standards.
- Ensure that the confirmative assessment used to document students' learning is inclusive of all aspects of the standard.

Figure 1.2 provides a sample table of specifications for a world history class. Notice the unit goals that align with the standards and then the various aspects of the standards that students would need to learn to reach proficiency.

Figure 1.2 • Table of Specifications for Modern World History: Unit 2—Connecting Hemispheres

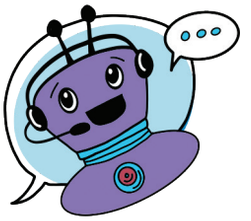
	Knowledge of . . .				Skills for . . .		
Unit Goals	**Terms**	**Facts**	**Concepts & Principles**	**Processes & Procedures**	**Translation or Transfer**	**Application**	**Analysis & Synthesis**
I can explain the development and influence of the Silk Road and Indian Ocean trade routes.	Silk Road, Indian Ocean trade	Trade routes connected Asia, Africa, and Europe.	Trade promotes cultural diffusion and political influence.	Analyze maps and primary sources to identify trade routes and goods.	Describe the cultural and political influence along trade routes.	Map trade routes and assess their impact on civilizations.	
I can analyze how trade influenced the development of African empires.	Ghana, Mali, Songhai, caravan, diffusion	African empires grew through trade networks and developed cultural identities.	Trade networks contributed to economic and cultural growth in African empires.		Explain the connection between trade and empire expansion.	Assess the role of trade in the rise of African empires.	Compare the political, social, and economic effects of trade on African empires.

(Continued)

(Continued)

	Knowledge of . . .				Skills for . . .		
Unit Goals	**Terms**	**Facts**	**Concepts & Principles**	**Processes & Procedures**	**Translation or Transfer**	**Application**	**Analysis & Synthesis**
I can explain how the Black Death acted as a catalyst for social, political, and economic change in Europe.	Black Death, Catholic Church, feudalism	The Black Death weakened feudalism and Church authority in Europe.	Disease spread along trade routes; led to social and political shifts.	Categorize effects of the Black Death by social, political, and economic impact.	Describe the impact of the Black Death on medieval society.		Analyze and synthesize the long-term social, economic, and political impacts of the Black Death.
I can describe the causes and effects of the Italian and Northern Renaissance.	Humanism, secularism, individualism	Renaissance ideas challenged Church authority and promoted individualism.	Humanism encouraged secularism and questioning of authority.		Distinguish between Italian and Northern Renaissance characteristics.	Compare the influence of Renaissance figures on European thought.	Analyze Renaissance texts and artworks to understand their cultural impact.
I can identify the main motivations for European exploration and the effects of the Columbian Exchange.	Columbian Exchange, mercantilism, Zheng He	The Columbian Exchange spread goods, diseases, and ideas globally.	Exploration affected indigenous populations and European economies.	Analyze explorers' contributions, and motivations; complete T-chart on mercantilist policies.	Describe items exchanged and their impacts on the Old and New Worlds.		Analyze the positive and negative effects of exploration on indigenous and European societies.
I can analyze the causes and consequences of the Atlantic Slave Trade.	Atlantic Slave Trade, colonization	Colonization and labor demand in the Americas expanded the African slave trade.	Trade and colonization drove the growth of slavery as an economic system.	Study data and primary sources on slave trade routes and impacts.	Summarize social and economic effects of the Atlantic Slave Trade.	Develop an infographic on causes and effects of the slave trade.	Analyze economic motivations and social consequences of the Atlantic Slave Trade across regions.
I can construct an argument on the consequences of increased global connections and interactions.	Debate, evidence	Global interactions led to significant cultural, economic, and social changes.	Increased interaction has both positive and negative consequences.	Synthesize research on global interactions' influence on civilizations.	Identify key arguments for and against global interactions.	Develop and support a position in a debate on global interactions.	Construct a well-supported argument analyzing long-term consequences of global connections.

ASK A BOT



PLC+ teams can use AI systems to draft a table of specifications for the team to analyze and improve. You might use the following frame to improve the quality of the output you receive from your chatbot:

> Using the attached document as a model [**UPLOAD A DOCUMENT**], develop a table of specifications for students in _____ grade based on the following standards: [**INSERT STANDARDS**]. Make sure to include the following categories: terms; facts, rules, and principles; processes and procedures; transfer skills or translation; application; and analysis and synthesis.

Note that creating a table of specifications is a bit more complex than identifying learning intentions and success criteria, so you may have to engage in a dialogue with your chatbot to make incremental improvements in the output.

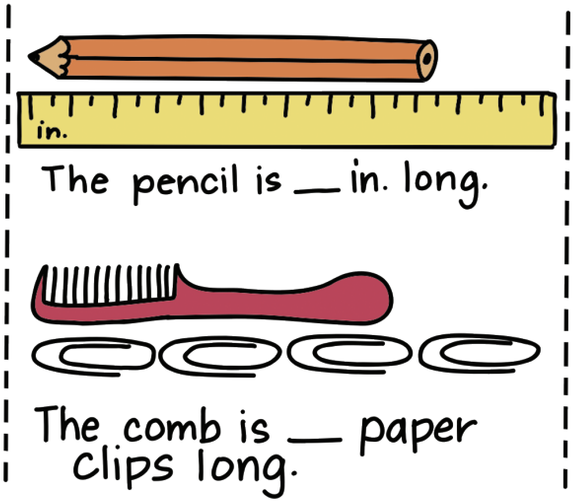
NOTES

QUICK START

	I can start this tomorrow	I can begin this month	I need to discuss this with others	Resources needed
Identify the standards that can be combined into a learning unit or that are commonly taught together in your HQIMs.				
Identify, or use a chatbot to identify, the “knowledge of” categories.				
Identify, or use a chatbot to identify, the “skills for” categories.				
Analyze the table of specifications for its alignment with the concepts and skills within the standards.				
Consider all aspects of the table of specifications for lesson design and assessment development.				

online resources Available for download at **https://companion.corwin.com/courses/PLC**

CASE IN POINT: A QUESTION OF SUCCESS



The second-grade teachers at Green Valley Elementary School met to analyze standards and identify learning intentions and success criteria. They found the process of naming the concepts and skills relatively easy, but it was much harder to agree on what the verb meant for their students. One of the standards that they focused on read as follows: *Estimate lengths using units of inches, feet, centimeters, and meters*.

As the discussion began, one of the teachers, Brandi Weston, said, "I'm not sure that I ever really paid attention to the word *estimate* like this. I mean, we teach them the measurement systems, but how close do their estimates need to be to be an estimate?"

One of her colleagues, Marco Jimenez, agreed, adding, "I wonder how far off their estimates would be. I think with some practice they could get pretty good at this. But I don't have an answer to how close they need to be for the estimate to be considered good enough. I think we should make this part of the lessons when we focus on measuring, especially when they measure to determine how much longer one object is compared with another."

Ms. Weston responded, "I agree with you that we could add the estimating into each lesson and into some practice work for students and their families so that we can see what we still need to teach them. Maybe we should include success criteria on this one to our lessons, such as, *I can explain my thinking when I estimate lengths*. This way, we can have the students tell us what they were thinking so that we can figure out what they still need to learn."

What's Your Advice?

- How can teams determine the rigor or expectation of the skills included in the standards?
- How might they collect information about what their students can already do in terms of the skill of estimating?
- Is the success criterion proposed by Ms. Weston useful and appropriate? Why or why not?

Video 1.5

An activator reflects on the case in point

qrs.ly/ckghob9

CROSSCUTTING VALUES CHECK

How is access to grade-level standards enacted at your school? Is it access for all or just for some? Consider these reflective questions to spark discussion with colleagues.

Equity and Fairness

- What steps have we taken to understand our own biases and perceptions?
- Do we recognize the historical barriers some students face in their learning journey?
- Do we understand the power of our collective decisions to address fairness for all students?

High Expectations

- Do we believe that all students can learn and achieve at high levels, and do we introduce them all to the appropriate grade-level standards?
- Do we believe that all of our students can achieve success?
- Do our learning intentions and success criteria reflect rigorous learning expectations for students?
- Would the students furthest from success agree that we hold high expectations for them and believe they can achieve success?

Individual and Collective Efficacy

- Do our skills in analyzing standards grow and develop as we work together as a team?
- Do we set goals for our time together and believe that we can accomplish our goals?
- Do we have evidence that our efforts are impacting our learning and the learning of our students?

Activators

- Do we develop and foster relational trust?
- Do we regularly prioritize time across the year to develop and foster relationships and trust with and between students?
- Do we have protocols for collaboratively analyzing standards and developing learning intentions and success criteria?
- Do we willingly share ideas but not try to sell our ideas to others?

SELF-ASSESSMENT

The question "Where are we going?" focuses attention on the intentions for learning. It challenges us to move beyond pacing guides and curriculum maps to make clear-eyed decisions about the learning path we will blaze. As you pursue answers to this question, make sure to keep the end in mind: What is it that we want our learners to know, understand, and be able to do?

Rapid Assessment:

We define our expectations through learning intentions and success criteria, and these definitions involve learning progressions over time, moving to the point of equity of access and opportunity for learning for all students.

1	2	3	4	5
Not Begun or Not Initiated	Very Limited Evidence of Capacity	Some Evidence of Capacity	Evidence of Capacity and Limited Evidence of Effective Implementation	Evidence of Capacity and Demonstrated Effective Implementation

Queries for Conducting a Detailed Assessment:

	Where Are We Going?	Not Begun or Not Initiated	Very Limited Evidence of Capacity	Some Evidence of Capacity	Evidence of Capacity and Limited Evidence of Effective Implementation	Evidence of Capacity and Demonstrated Effective Implementation
1.1	We regularly analyze expectations based upon the standards and/or curriculum that guide our efforts.	1	2	3	4	5
1.2	Our efforts result in equity of access for all learners.	1	2	3	4	5
1.3	Our efforts result in opportunity for learning for all learners.	1	2	3	4	5
1.4	We regularly outline learning progressions.	1	2	3	4	5
1.5	Our efforts reflect true learning progressions over time, rather than a given lesson at a specific point or points in time.	1	2	3	4	5
1.6	We present instruction that includes explicit success criteria that our students understand.	1	2	3	4	5
1.7	We present instruction that includes explicit learning intentions that our students understand.	1	2	3	4	5

online resources Available for download at **https://companion.corwin.com/courses/PLC**

NOTICE AND REFLECT

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How can teacher teams identify the learning journeys of their students?

THINK ABOUT

- How do the academic content standards impact planning decisions?
- How are our expectations for students' learning telegraphed based on what we believe they can learn?
- How do we maintain high expectations, even when students have unfinished learning that impacts their performance?

START – STOP – KEEP

Based on what you learned in this module, answer the questions below.

Start: What practice(s) would you like to start doing?
Stop: What practice(s) would you like to stop doing?
Keep: What practice(s) would you like to keep doing?

NOTES