

The What, Why and How of Professional Learning Teams

Notes for practitioners

Many schools have seen the benefit of supporting teacher learning communities in one form or another. The nature of such communities has been extensively researched by Dylan Wiliam: see for example the 2007 paper 'Tight but Loose' (you can download this as a Word file from http://dylanwiliam.org/Dylan_Wiliams_website/Papers.html). The essence is a small group of teachers who meet together regularly to deepen their understanding of an approach, trying out new things and reflecting on and sharing their experiments with each other. Such communities work best when they have 6-8 teachers with similar subjects or age groups, and who meet monthly for about 75 minutes over a couple of years.

A team session is usually arranged like this...

Introduction

Firstly the group members agree aims for the meeting, and quickly offload irritations or frustrations about work that otherwise could hinder the progress and feel of the meeting.

Sharing how things are going

Each member gives a summary of what he or she has tried to achieve since the last meeting. Everyone is expected to report back to every meeting. The group question and probe their colleagues' summaries to encourage analysis and deeper reflection. They use BLP-type questions such as 'What do you think is getting in the way? What would make this even better? How could this technique be modified to make it work for you? What do you think made that work so well?'

New learning

The middle section of the meeting is where new ideas are introduced. There are many aspects to the BLP agenda—language, classroom organisation, split-screen teaching, tracking progression—and the groups work on these according to the order of sessions they have decided on. So this part of the meeting includes some discussion about how to design split-screen lessons, how to use the language in feedback or target setting, or how to design activities to stretch a particular learning muscle. These issues will have been introduced in the Advance Organiser 'lessons'.

This changing middle section keeps the meetings fresh, but importantly aims to progress the breadth and depth of the approach.

Personal action planning

Each member then plans what they intend to try over the next month. This gives staff time to think and plan.

Review of the meeting

Finally the group reflect on the original objectives of the meeting to see if they have been achieved.

This tight format makes the purpose of the exercise clear, and everyone knows what is expected of them. Meetings such as these have been a prominent feature in many BLP schools and have helped teachers and support staff to take risks, examine their practice, and share both successes and tricky problems in an atmosphere of trust and commitment. These discussions substantially support the systematic development of learning powered teaching habits.

Suggested ground rules for the Professional Learning Team

Pre-session organisation

All team members to:

- undertake / complete the Advance Organiser prior to the session
- bring their results of the Advance Organiser to the meeting
- bring the session Agenda from the Advance Organiser to the meeting
- bring their previous session's Personal Action Plan to the meeting
- prepare a two-minute input about their lesson experiments to share with the group

In-session climate

- Everyone fully engaged in the group
- No group member can 'pass'
- Active listening when not your turn
- Actively discuss everyone's input
- What is said is confidential to the group
- Constructive criticism — developmental not judgmental
- No put-downs
- Open-mindedness
- Respect others' views and encourage others' ideas

Post-session activity

- Everyone to undertake their small-scale learning enquiries with a view to feeding back at the next session.
- Participate honestly in completing the electronic evaluation at the end of a module (typically three team meetings about one learning behaviour)

We hope you will discuss these at the first session and add to or amend them to suit your team's way of working. It's a good idea to review these occasionally to make sure the team is working well for all its members.