

Best Practices/Tom W. Many, EdD

Double Duty Data

Understanding the Dual Roles of Using Data in a PLC



“Teachers learn to draw connections between their instructional practice and student learning through the deliberate analysis of data.” -Elmore

Data from common assessments has two roles in a PLC. One widely recognized use of this kind of data is to identify those students who were and were not proficient. When teachers use common assessment data to identify students who have not mastered a particular standard, they are able to provide more timely and targeted feedback during interventions. Using data in this way is a critical component of the PLC process as teams work to operationalize the belief that all kids can learn when given enough time and the right kind of support.

A second legitimate use of common assessment data is to provide teachers with a way to examine their professional practice. When teams use data to analyze the effectiveness of instructional strategies they ensure the positive effect of an effective strategy is maximized while the negative impact of ineffective strategies is minimized or eliminated altogether. Using common assessment data for this second purpose serves as a powerful way to promote collaboration and continuous improvement in a PLC.

“When it comes to improving instruction and learning, it’s not the quantity of the data that counts, but how the information is used.” -Hamilton

Of the two, the most widely accepted use of common assessment data is as a way to identify students who are and are not proficient. Once teams have identified students who have not

mastered a particular learning target, the goal is to efficiently and effectively provide the student with more time and support without missing direct instruction in another subject.

This usually is a fairly simple and straightforward task, however, some teams find the process to be cumbersome and time consuming. Teams can spend too much time gathering, collecting, and organizing the data. In fact, too much emphasis on the mechanics of compiling data can actually prevent teams from using the data to improve student learning.

At times, the sheer volume of data can be overwhelming and some teams report there is so much data they don’t have time to sort it all, and even less time to use it all. Teachers in these schools are suffering from DRIP—they are data rich but information poor—because the results from their common assessments have not been translated from data into information they can use.

If a team finds that all they do is collect and compile data it may be there are too many learning targets on the assessment (the fewer the number of targets, the more clarity teachers have about the academic needs of individual students), or it may indicate a need for training around the use of protocols, or it may even mean the team is using the task of compiling data as a way of avoiding the harder conversations around using the data to improve teaching and learning.

Whatever the reason, these teams are victims of what Heather Friziellie calls ‘paralysis by analysis.’ In order to avoid this frustrating condition, teams should devote 25 percent of their time to the analysis and interpretation of data and the remaining 75 percent of their time on collaboratively planning how to improve student learning. Remember, the goal is to use data, not collect it.

“The best classroom assessments serve as meaningful sources of information for teachers, helping them identify what they taught well and what they need to work on.” -Guskey

In order to maximize the impact of data on professional practice Michelle Forman believes, “teachers must investigate the manner in which they currently teach the skill and recast the learner-centered problem as a problem of practice.” Forman continues, “In order to reframe the learner-centered problem as a problem of instruction, teachers must reflect on the link between their instructional practice and student learning.”

One of the best ways to approach the task Foreman advocates is to separate the effective instructional strategies from less effective or even totally ineffective ones. As Guskey says, “Structured conversations grounded in data from quality common assessments can help teachers share strategies and collaborate on teaching techniques.” Through the careful analysis of data, teachers on collaborative teams can readily identify those practices that should be retained, refined or replaced.

Using the unit of study as the basis of comparison, teachers identify which lessons, activities or approaches to a particular skill or concept were most effective in helping students learn. The highly effective instructional strategies are retained as part of the unit moving forward. In this way, teachers begin to create their own local norms of what best practice looks like in their classrooms.

Teachers also understand that from time to time, instructional strategies will only be partially successful in helping students learn and will fall short of expectations as ways to promote mastery of specific learning targets. These are the instructional strategies, once identified, that teams commit to refine. Teachers tweak, clarify, adjust and look for better ways to implement these strategies in future lessons.

Finally, some instructional strategies just do not work and need to be replaced. There are times when the majority of students answer a question incorrectly, fail to master

a learning target or consistently misunderstand a concept. Guskey points out that when this happens, “it’s not a student learning problem—it’s a teaching problem.” He continues, “Whatever teaching strategy was used, whatever examples were employed, or whatever explanation was offered, it simply didn’t work.” In these situations teams need to eliminate and replace the failed instructional strategy with a different one.

Many teams have become quite competent in using data to identify which students are proficient, which students are not, and which students will need more time and support to learn. Fewer teams have been as successful using assessment data to reflect upon their professional practice and retain, refine or replace instructional strategies as necessary to improve teaching and learning.

“The heart of the work is in finding ways to engage school faculties in tough conversations about how their teaching impacts student learning.” -Murname

According to Kim Marshall, the challenge faced by teacher teams and principals alike is not generating data or even collecting data, but using data to “foster the quality of relentless follow-up in every classroom, every grade level team, and every department” to improve teaching and learning. Using data from common assessments to 1) identify the students who were and were not proficient and 2) as a way to examine their professional practice can help teams achieve that goal. ■

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References

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