

Best Practices/Tom Many, EdD, and Tesha Thomas



“A coach can foster conditions in which deep reflection and learning can take place, where a teacher can take risks to change her practice, where powerful conversations can take place and growth is recognized and celebrated.” -Elena Aguilar, (2013)

In two separate studies, Supovitz (2002) and Supovitz & Christman (2003) found students whose teachers focused their team meetings on analyzing student work and reflecting on instructional practice showed higher academic gains than students whose teachers did not.

The observation that students learn more when teachers focus on learning may seem obvious, but when Supovitz and Christman (2003) observed actual PLC team meetings, they reported teams rarely “moved to...collective analysis of teaching or review of student work” (p. 5). Without a clear focus on analyzing student work or reflecting on their instructional practice, Supovitz and Christman concluded it was unlikely teams would achieve their goals around improving student achievement.

Our experience has been similar; we see many teams lose their focus during team meetings and drift away from the analysis of student work or the discussion of their instructional practices. The challenge for principals, coaches and teacher leaders is to find ways to help teachers keep their team meetings focused on the right work.

“The likelihood of using new learning and sharing responsibility rises when colleagues, guided by a coach, work together and hold each other accountable for improved teaching and learning.”

-Elena Aguilar, (2013)

In Macomb ISD in Macomb County Michigan, Tesha Thomas has combined the practice of coaching with a series of guiding questions to help teams focus on the right work. Thomas, and the teams she works with, created a series of cascading questions called Pathways that lead teams through the process of analyzing student work and reflecting on their instructional practice. When guiding questions are coupled with coaching and protocols, these Pathways strengthen the process teams follow to reflect on their work and ensure that teams remain focused on “the right work.”

Before Thomas began coaching teams with the Pathways concept, teams would often flounder, not knowing how to keep their focus on the four questions of PLCs. She worked with teams by attending team meetings and providing them with agendas to guide their work. While the agendas

helped and provided some of the structure teams needed, they did not give teams the guidance they needed to become a true community of learners.

Pathways, on the other hand, provide teachers with probing questions that relate directly to the four critical questions of learning teams answer in a PLC. Teachers choose which Pathway to follow based on where they are within an instructional unit. For example, when teachers are preparing to teach a unit and begin to address the question, “*What do we want our students to know and be able to do?*” they follow the lesson planning Pathway. View a sample Pathway at <http://bit.ly/plcmeetingguidance>.

The lesson-planning Pathway guides the team through a series of interdependent questions that support effective instructional design. Beginning with the team’s SMART goal, teams ask and answer questions about the unit’s learning targets, prerequisite skills, proficiency levels, instructional strategies, academic vocabulary, and evidence of effectiveness. Each question leads to the next and ensures that teachers consider what they know to be best practice at every step of the lesson planning process.

When using Pathways teams create, collect or compile artifacts that logically flow from the team’s efforts to respond to the critical questions of learning. Examples of documents teams generate while using the lesson planning Pathway might include SMART goal worksheets, templates for prioritizing and unwrapping standards, tracking forms for the learning targets, and unit planning overviews.

According to classroom teacher Michelle Kado, “Pathways is a powerful tool that provides a quick reference guide to which documents are needed for PLC teams regardless of where they are at in the process.” The documents Kado is referring to are not extra or additional paperwork but authentic products (tools, forms and frameworks) created to accomplish the tasks associated with a particular Pathway.

Other Pathways have been created to help teams answer the other critical questions of learning. For example, when teachers are reflecting on the instructional practices they plan to use within a particular unit, they follow the instructional strategies Pathway. When teams need to create valid and reliable assessments, teachers refer to the common assessment Pathway. Likewise, the intervention Pathway helps teams focus on identifying effective strategies to use when providing more time and support to struggling students. By working their way through these Pathways, coaches keep teams focused on the elements of good teaching and the important work of PLCs.

“The guidance provided by the different Pathways combined with the coaching gave us a great road map to follow when we were beginning our PLC journey. It provided the foundation each group needed to stay on task and make the most of our time during PLC meetings.”

-Laurie Hillebrand, classroom teacher

Teachers report that using Pathways have made them confident they are doing the right work in the right way. As a result, they describe feeling empowered with a renewed sense of efficacy around improving student learning. Principal Fran Hobbs endorsed the use of Pathways stating, “Our grade level teams meet weekly in PLCs. Because teams choose which Pathway to follow based on the pacing of their instruction and the needs of their students, they know in advance what next steps they will need to consider. The combination of coaching with the right set of guiding questions allows our grade level teams to be more targeted and productive in their PLC meetings.”

We know that Professional Learning Communities have a positive impact on student achievement, but only when teams are focused on the right work. By combining the concept of Pathways with regular, routine, and job-embedded coaching we can get teams back on track and focused on the fundamental purpose of PLCs—that of improving student achievement for all. ■

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Resources

- Aguilar, E. (2013). How Coaching Can Impact Teachers, Principals, and Students. Edutopia, 1-3. Available at <http://www.edutopia.org/blog/coaching-impact-teachers-principals-students-elena-aguilar>.
- Supovitz, J. A., & Christman, J. B. (2003). Developing Communities of Instructional Practice: Lessons from Cincinnati and Philadelphia. *CPRE Policy Briefs*, 1-9. doi:10.1037/e565282006-001
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