



Professional Learning Community Observation Protocol

R e f e r e n c e E d i t i o n

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Introduction

This observation protocol is structured around three key elements of an effective Professional Learning Community (PLC): Shared Vision and Ways of Working, Collaboration, and Reflective Dialogue. These three elements combine to help foster open communication among group members so that they develop common norms, vision, and goals. The two main purposes of this protocol are to help groups 1) build and deepen a *shared understanding* of what it means to work effectively as a PLC, and 2) provide a meaningful tool for *self-monitoring* a PLC's development.

I. Shared Vision and Ways of Working

The group has a common vision and applies standards as criteria in its actions, reflections, and planning.

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) focus on student learning as the end and teaching as the means. Developing consciousness about norms and values is central to the community-building process. When shared norms of collaboration are attended to over time, it will produce skilled communication and increased clarity and cohesion within working groups (Garmston & Wellman, 1999).

- ☐ The focus of the group's activities is on students' understanding of science content in order to improve student learning.
- ☐ The team has standards or criteria that specify what determines proficiency in student work.
- ☐ Team members share ideas based on evidence, and discussions of the pros and cons of ideas are grounded in evidence.
- ☐ The group plans for and pursues opportunities to enhance their content knowledge when needed.
- ☐ Actions are planned and modified based on available research.

II. Collaboration

The group creates an environment that fosters open communication and sharing of ideas. All members have the opportunity to learn from one another and support the group's continuous improvement. The group is organized and managed to achieve its goals.

Collaboration refers to sharing expertise and perspectives on teaching and learning processes, examining data about students, and developing a sense of mutual support and shared responsibility for effective instruction. Developing collaborative cultures is the work of leaders who realize that a collection of superstar teachers working in isolation cannot produce the same results as interdependent colleagues who share and develop professional practices together (Garmston & Wellman, 1999).

- ☐ Members value the contributions of other members of the group and are open to different points of view.
- ☐ Criticism is constructive and there is a collegial challenging of diverse ideas.
- ☐ Responsibilities are shared amongst all members of the group.
- ☐ The group is good at managing their time. The meeting is efficient and effective.

III. Reflective Dialogue

The group monitors its actions, decisions, and reflections based on its common norms and goals.

Reflective dialogue helps develop shared understandings of such things as the purposes of and processes for learning. Shared understandings bind communities together and bind members to shared goals and shared work. Through reflective dialogue, group members gain perspective on who and how they are to each other and to those they serve. Reflective dialogue is the catalyst for reflective practice. It helps participants develop self-awareness and collective awareness of personal and shared work (Garmston & Wellman, 1999).

- ☐ The group monitors its understanding of information that informs its activities.
- ☐ The group monitors its progress and adjusts its processes to become more effective when appropriate.
- ☐ The group considers several ways of doing something before deciding what might work best.
- ☐ Connections are made between past learning, current goals, and intended applications.

Garmston, R., & Wellman, B. (1999). *The Adaptive School: A sourcebook for developing collaborative groups*. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon

Considering Professional Interactions to Develop Capacity for Institutional Change

Stevens and Kahne identify types of practice that Professional Learning Communities generally gravitate towards: supportive and developmental. While both practices are collaborative in nature, supportive practices tend to occur in response to immediate and pressing concerns, primarily leading to short-term exchanges with little follow-up. Developmental practices are proactive attempts to address systemic concerns within long-term projects involving sustained and regular activities.

Supportive practices are interactions through which teachers exchange information, advice, and approaches for addressing specific tasks, problems, or concerns. Through these exchanges teachers support each other in performing their routine classroom responsibilities.

Developmental practices, on the other hand, are interactions and activities through which teacher communities attempt to improve the collective instructional capacity of their members and change classroom practices. These practices include questioning the effectiveness of teaching routines, sharing student work to identify possible areas for instructional improvement, developing plans for improvement, and implementing and monitoring improvement strategies.

The elements of effective Professional Learning Communities in the observation protocol can empower groups in moving from supportive practices to developmental practices as summarized in the following table.

| Supportive vs Developmental Practices | | |
|--|---|---|
| Typically, teachers help each other by using one of two types of collaborative practice. However, only developmental practices lead to lasting, systemic change. | | |
| Dimensions | Supportive Practices | Developmental Practices |
| Focus | Supporting routine tasks (i.e., sharing information about students or new ideas for classroom activities) | Improving instructional capacity (i.e., developing standards-based curricula or new interdisciplinary curricular units) |
| Context | Informal, individual, and groups interactions (random conversation) | Formal, collective interactions (regular structured meetings) |
| Prompts | Reactive (responding to immediate, pressing concerns) | Proactive (addressing systemic, general concerns) |
| Time Frame | Short-term solutions | Long-term solutions |
| Type of information exchanged | Disconnected pieces of information about individual problems (spontaneous advice) | Connected sets of information about common problems (deliberate follow up and monitoring) |
| Depth of Change | Isolated, corrective changes | Systemic, fundamental changes |
| <i>Source: W.D. Stevens, with J. Kahne, "Professional Communities and Instructional Practices"</i> | | |