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PLCs and the Common Core: Are We Leaving Instruction Behind?

by Bradley Ermeling — January 18, 2013

The Common Core State Standards have potential to improve student learning but are arriving with a questionable assumption: common standards plus increasing accountability pressures will translate into improved practice and achievement. Standards define where students need to be; accountability systems document where they are. Educators are supposed to discover ways to close the gap. Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) could play a pivotal role in closing this gap, but not unless we re-conceptualize their structure and content to include meaningful reflection on instruction and provide teachers with a roadmap to productively guide collaborative work around the CCSS.

Teaching is a perfect storm of multiple responsibilities and limited time. A storm that reaches hurricane proportions when a major new initiative blows into schools. The latest is the Common Core State Standards (CCSS).

As with other initiatives in recent years, the CCSS have the potential to improve student learning but are arriving with a questionable assumption: common standards plus increasing accountability pressures will translate into improved practice and achievement. Standards define where students need to be; accountability systems document where they are. Educators are supposed to discover ways to close the gap. Apparently in many schools "discovery" means teachers going it alone. According to a RAND survey, a majority of teachers reported that accountability pressures prompted them to try new approaches. But that survey also revealed there was no convergence on increasingly effective teaching.

Going it alone, each teacher trying to work out how to close the gap, defies common sense. This is why districts have turned to professional learning communities (PLCs), an approach urged by the USDOE and other national organizations such as Learning Forward.

PLCs could play a pivotal role, but not unless we re-conceptualize the structure and content and provide teachers with a roadmap to productively guide their collaborative work around the CCSS. As noted on the official CCSS website, "The standards are essential, but inadequate. Along with standards, educators must be given resources, tools, and time to adjust classroom practice."

Specifically, teachers and learning communities will need resources, tools, and time for at least three levels of activity:

BEFORE THE LAUNCH

At the outset, prior to launching work on the Common Core, teachers should receive 1-2 days of introduction to the CCSS initiative. Outcomes of this training should include understanding the rationale for the standards, inherent instructional shifts associated with the standards, and how the standards relate to what teachers already have in place in their district and state. Too many initiatives are implemented with the assumption of a blank slate, but schools have a history of work they have been undergoing to diligently address achievement issues so it is important to build from that history as a starting point.

This introductory training should also engage teachers in the study of the overall learning pathway or progression of the standards both in terms of how they connect vertically across grade-levels as well as within a specific grade-level. Understanding how learning progresses along this pathway or continuum enables teachers to identify students' position on the pathway and make instructional choices to help move students forward.

BEFORE EACH UNIT

As teachers progress through the school year, they also need periodic half-day sessions to work in teams and prepare their scope and sequence for the upcoming unit or units of instruction. During these sessions teachers review the learning pathway or progression represented by the standards and think through how to best distribute and prioritize instructional time across various standards within the unit. They map out specific lessons, projects, assignments, and formative assessment plans that will help advance students toward intended learning outcomes.

ONGOING STUDY

Finally, on a weekly basis, or at least 2-3 times a month, teachers need an hour of focused collaboration time in grade-level or content-specific teams to study and refine their teaching of selected priority standards. These meetings should be guided by trained teacher-facilitators and should include a process or protocol that helps teachers think through critical questions for improving teaching and learning.

Conduct a search for PLC practices on the internet and the majority of entries will bring up a model that focuses on some version of the following questions:

1. What do students need to know and be able to do?
2. How will we know when they have learned it?
3. What will we do when they haven't learned it?
4. What will we do when they already know it?

While these are all important elements of teaching and learning, what's missing between 2 and 3 is the critical question that involves instruction: How will we teach this well so that all students learn?

So often, PLCs might focus on isolated tasks such as unpacking standards, designing assessments, analyzing student work, or reflecting on assessment results. But groups rarely connect ends and means when working on these isolated activities.

Standards are critical, but studying them has limited value unless they are connected to planning, implementing and analyzing specific instruction and student outcomes related to the standards. Examining student work or assessments is also important, but too often is viewed as an end in itself. Instead, it should be included as one step in the larger process of improving teaching related to one or more specific student learning needs.

Without this additional PLC question focused on teaching, groups are sent down a path that perpetuates the mindset of, "We taught them, but they are just not getting it." Instead, we need to introduce models for ongoing study that help teachers translate new inputs into improved teaching and foster the mindset of "You haven't taught until they've learned." This means constructing systems of

support and processes that feature the study of both teaching and learning. It means working through a more nuanced series of questions and tasks that help teachers collaboratively investigate classroom interactions to learn how specific instructional choices influence student performance. Some examples include:

Based on our assessment data, what central ideas from the CSSS are students struggling to learn well? What will evidence of student learning look like for this standard? What student work will we collect and what performance task will we use to measure progress?

How will we teach this well so that all students learn? What instructional shifts will this require? What do we have to learn or study before we are prepared to teach? What obstacles do we expect in student thinking? How will we advance students forward on the learning pathway?

What does the evidence from performance tasks suggest about student strengths and continuing needs? How did our instructional plan contribute to this and what teaching needs to be revised to address continuing needs?

This kind of instructional inquiry is particularly important in the context of the CCSS because the demands and expectations of the standards assume and require of teachers an increased amount of professional knowledge and judgment. Knowledge of not only the standards and the outcomes related to those standards, but also knowledge of the deeper student thinking and cognition that will lead to those outcomes. And, perhaps most important, the understanding of instructional options that could inhibit or enable this level of cognition.

We can increase mandates and accountabilities and require that new standards be implemented. We can raise the stakes and develop more accurate and innovative assessments. But unless we engage schools and learning communities in deep and meaningful support of classroom-level change, and unless that support produces specific knowledge about the dynamic relationship between teaching and learning of the new standards, then the promise of the Common Core is unlikely to materialize.

Bradley A. Ermeling (brad.ermeling@gmail.com) is senior research scientist with the Pearson Research and Innovation Network and member of a research team from UCLA and Stanford.

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