

Tools *for* LEARNING SCHOOLS

LEARNING FORWARD'S VISION: EXCELLENT TEACHING AND LEARNING EVERY DAY

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Fall 2015

Vol. 19, No. 1

Learning team cycle of continuous improvement

By Tracy Crow and Stephanie Hirsh

In education and in other professions, we read about improvement, learning, or change happening in a cycle. At its most fundamental, active learners, whether adults or children, observe the world around them, take action based on what they understand, and then reflect on what happened before they take their next actions, modifying strategies to better achieve the results they seek.

Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning and definition of professional development put a cycle of continuous improvement at the heart of collaborative learning. We believe that a team learning cycle is the means for embedding professional learning in the day-to-day work of teachers, supporting them when they need it most.

The stages within the cycle may vary slightly according to the scope of responsibility of the team engaging in



the cycle. For example, a district professional learning committee may engage in the backmapping cycle to establish a year-long plan for the school system. The school improvement team may engage in one cycle for developing a year-long plan and another for examining a particular challenge at a deeper level.

The five stages we describe here guide the work of a learning team, most typically in a school, whose members share collective responsibility for the success of a group of students as well as each other.

ENTERING THE CYCLE

How do learning teams know what student learning gap they're going to address during their time together? Ideally, they have the benefit

of working within a system or school that has crafted a shared vision for the success of all students or ensures that

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educators' work at all levels is aligned to an overall improvement plan. Alternatively, teams may craft their own vision for improvement and use it as a driver for their ongoing work and persistence. Depending on the context, educators may then dig into high-level data to determine broad areas requiring their attention.

Because the real world throws challenges at teachers from all directions, they'll likely be working on multiple improvement goals at once. The learning team has the important responsibility to identify which learning challenge, if addressed, will most benefit the students they serve collectively.

STAGE BY STAGE

Examine data: Understand student and educator learning challenges.

In this stage, educators are focused on the critical questions: What do students need to know and be able to do, and what do the data indicate about our success in meeting these outcomes to date?

During this phase, team members study data to identify precisely what problem deserves their attention most. For example, while a team may be working in a context where their schoolwide goal is to increase reading comprehension, only through looking at student data will they know exactly which elements of reading comprehension are problematic, who is struggling, and who is succeeding.

Central to this work is establishing a culture where educators embrace the use of data. Educators also need knowledge and skills to use data effectively.

Set goals: Identify shared goals for student and educator learning.

During this stage, team members are focused on the question: What do students and educators need to learn in order for students to achieve desired outcomes? During the previous stage, teams were aware of the broad end goals. In this stage, their attention shifts to addressing the gaps that were identified as a result of their data analysis work. Team members are now ready to set specific student and educator learning goals. Many teams have found the SMART goal format (specific, measurable, attainable, results-based, timebound) to be extremely helpful in creating goals whose outcomes can be easily monitored and reported.

After the team determines their student SMART goals, they are ready to determine what they need to know as educators to help their students be successful in achieving

the SMART goal. Educators consider the content expertise attached to the goal, the pedagogical competencies required by the goal, and any special needs of their particular group of students. The list of adult learning needs can be long. It will be up to the team to identify the most relevant needs to address to achieve their desired outcomes.

This stage ensures that educator learning is intentional and tied directly to what students need to learn.

Learn individually and collaboratively: Extend educators' knowledge of content, content-specific pedagogy, how students learn, and management of classroom environments.

In this stage of the process, learning teams are addressing the question: How will we engage in learning to achieve desired outcomes for both ourselves and our students? As they choose among many collaborative and individual learning possibilities, they will consider first and foremost what outcome they seek. They expect to have new knowledge and skills, and they expect to have an actionable plan for using it in the classroom with students and must seek learning that fits their expectations.

Team members also need to consider how to best differentiate their learning. While the team may have set collective goals to achieve, each team member has his or her own learning preferences, works in a particular career stage, and already has a unique level of content and pedagogical expertise tied to the goal.

With clarity around the specific learning needs and inclinations of each team member, the team can identify expertise and options for learning. There are many resources available to assist them in selecting the appropriate learning strategy. Among their options, they may seek information resources for study. They might turn not only to one another but to other colleagues in their district for expertise. They may ask an instructional coach in their building or district, perhaps even a coach on their team, for mini lessons on using particular strategies.

Teachers may need to turn elsewhere for expertise if they don't have the knowledge in the building or district, whether to an online network or a technical assistance provider with a specialty focus. Their learning may take many forms at this stage, and they engage as active participants throughout the process.

Apply new learning: Implement new lessons and strategies with local support at the work site.

At this stage, team members address the question: What will now change based on our learning? They take their learning into their classrooms. While they've had opportunities to practice with peers, teachers aren't apply-

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Learning Forward BELIEF

More students achieve when educators assume collective responsibility for student learning.

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ing their learning until they change what they do in the classroom in the presence of students.

Teachers will apply their new learning more than once — as they become more familiar with new strategies, they become smarter not only in implementing strategies and knowledge with fidelity but also through the feedback their coaches and peers offer. The first steps in the use of new strategies don't always immediately lead to the intended outcome. Even at the classroom level, teachers can experience the implementation dip, where new practices at first show a decline in results. Change, after all, takes time, and moving a body of learners forward isn't an instant outcome.

Teachers have support in taking their learning to this stage from coaches or peers. Perhaps they co-teach a lesson with a peer; perhaps a coach observes and supports the teacher before, during, and after with questions and suggestions. Perhaps they use video of their own teaching as a tool throughout the learning and application of new knowledge.

Refine practice: Use evidence to monitor and adjust implementation.

In this stage, teams ask the question: What is the impact of our learning? Once teachers take new practices into classrooms, they start to watch how their new knowledge and instructional strategies impact what happens in the classroom. They gather evidence of the implementation of their learning, and this evidence may take many forms.

Not only can they watch how students respond during class time, they also gather information from classroom assessments and student work. Based on the student learning goals they've set, teams develop formative and summative assessments that measure precisely what they hoped to achieve. They use the results to inform the learning steps they will take next.

Teams examine this evidence and consider whether new classroom strategies are helping them achieve their goals. With this information, they may realize they are on the right track and can refine what they do with students. They may also realize that their changes in practice aren't contributing to student learning, in which case they will adjust their plans. They'll need to consider several questions as they refine. Did they make the right assumptions when they set their own learning goals? Did they engage in appropriate learning that really helped them achieve their learning goals? Did they implement new strategies with fidelity and get sufficient support in applying their learning in the classroom?

When successful in achieving its initial goals, the team is ready to take on its next challenge. When results fall short, the team may return to a previous stage to dig deeper into the actions it must take to produce better outcomes for students.

A word about learning teams

Learning teams function at many levels within schools, across a school system, in state or regional clusters, and virtually across time and space. Teams may form through the actions of their members, or they may form through mandate. Members may come together because of the grade level or the subject area they cover, or based on particular projects or job roles or titles. They may seek teammates to address common challenges or create innovative solutions. Team members may not have colleagues in their buildings or even districts who can collaborate around their specific needs and thus may need to find peers in other ways, perhaps virtually or through periodic face-to-face gatherings.

Thus, we recognize that not every learning team has a scheduled time and place to meet together each week and may need to adapt the suggestions and actions we offer.

WHY IT MATTERS

Many schools and systems understand that learning teams or professional learning communities are a valuable structure for ensuring that educators have time to learn in collaboration with colleagues. Some districts establish team time with a clear vision for exactly what the learning teams will do, including how they will use their time together and what results they are expected to achieve. Other districts have been convinced that PLCs would be great, so they create schedules that allow teams to meet, yet they don't have a plan or vision for what those teams will do during that time. They trust that the professionals will know what to do with the time.

Setting aside team time without a plan is a professional hazard. Districts can go to a lot of trouble to rearrange schedules, at the risk of upsetting parents and expending considerable energy with teachers and unions. If that time isn't well spent, everyone involved will label team learning a waste and professional development gets another black mark. The cycle of continuous improvement is the plan for using that time in ways that lead to changes in practice and student results.

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Applying the team learning cycle

A big question for learning teams is how they will schedule their meeting time specifically to work through these five stages. As one option, we offer a six-week cycle, a typical grading period for many school systems, that takes teams through the five stages, and we understand that teams may need to adjust based on the team time they have, the course content they need to cover, and myriad other factors that contribute to the pacing of both adult and student learning.

Our six-week schedule works most ideally with the following supporting conditions and elements:

- Teachers have three or more hours per week to learning collaboratively with their teams.
- Teachers have access to the data they need to understand student learning gaps and set meaningful goals.
- Teachers are motivated to change short- and long-term lessons based on what they learn together.
- Teachers can set their learning schedule so that the application stage has them teaching a new and improved lesson during week five of the cycle.
- Teachers work both individually and collectively on the problems they identify together – the learning doesn't happen solely during team time.
- Teachers have ready access to learning support within the school or district.
- Teachers work in a culture that prioritizes continuous learning for adults with a climate where trust pervades all interactions.
- Teachers know generally where their greatest student learning gaps lie, informed by school and system improvement goals.
- Teachers have the expertise and/or support to collaborate efficiently during their limited collaboration time.

WEEK 1: EXAMINE DATA.

Teachers arrive with data in hand, ready to pinpoint student learning challenges and differences among classrooms and various groups of students. During their meeting, team members highlight key data points and analyze various sources of data to identify trends. The team's goal is to come to consensus about the student learning gaps that stand out as their next most important challenges.

During this stage, individuals may:

- Examine portions of the data on their own and prepare to bring key points to the team.
- Examine their own performance related to the student data.
- Reflect on what they believe the data tell them.

During this stage, the team may:

- Ask individual members to share essential data points or trends for discussion.
- Examine data collaboratively, perhaps using a protocol to move efficiently through the information.
- Ensure that all team members speak up with important understandings from the data.
- Reach consensus on the most urgent data to address.

WEEK 2: SET GOALS.

The learning team has decided on the most urgent data to address, so they use this stage to determine learning outcomes for both students and themselves.

During this stage, individuals may:

- Reflect on their individual assumptions about what led to their data findings.
- Consider past and current individual goals for performance, perhaps informed by the educator evaluation process they experience.

During this stage, the team may:

- Surface assumptions and beliefs about what contributes to the key data findings they will address.
- Review important connections between teacher learning, teacher practices, and student outcomes.
- Discuss student learning goals that will lead to better outcomes in the data.
- Discuss what adult learning outcomes will lead to better student outcomes.
- Reach consensus on most important goals to set for this period.

WEEKS 3 AND 4: LEARN INDIVIDUALLY AND COLLABORATIVELY.

With goals in hand, team members need to engage in professional learning intended to help them achieve outcomes.

During this stage, teams learn both individually and collectively. As a team, they may:

- Use expertise and research to identify learning options that will most effectively lead to the outcomes they seek.
- Pause frequently for reflection, allowing time for journaling or discussion to make meaning as they progress.
- Learn collaboratively using any of a range of learning strategies if their individual needs and preferences indicate.

WEEK 5: APPLY LEARNING.

In this stage, teachers are taking their learning to the classrooms. In most cases, this will mean teaching new lesson(s) that they've prepared for throughout the earlier stages.

During this stage, individuals may:

- Implement learning in classrooms.
- Seek support from peers and coach.
- Gather feedback from students.

During this stage, teams may:

- Discuss how learning is going.
- Share successes and challenges.
- Observe colleagues and discuss observations.
- Engage in team conversations with a coach.
- Use innovation configuration maps to assess implementation.

WEEK 6: MONITOR AND ADJUST PROGRESS.

With the new professional learning applied, team members gather data in their classroom about what is working and what isn't.

During this stage, individuals may:

- Use formative or summative classroom assessments tied to new practices.
- Reflect on their individual learning and application and steps for moving forward with improvement goals.

During this stage, teams may:

- Examine student work and other assessment data to determine how new practices worked.
- Discuss successes and challenges.
- Consider modifications to the strategies as well as lessons they created.
- Discuss fidelity of implementation of learning.
- Discuss earlier assumptions about which practices lead to which outcomes.
- Determine next stages.

Plan for team growth

Directions: Begin now to plan for success as a productive team. Use this tool to track how well your team is modeling these 10 important characteristics. Discuss each characteristic together, and fill in the column at right. Complete a chart at regular intervals — monthly or quarterly.

Date _____

| TEAM GROWTH INDICATORS | What might someone observing us see or hear that would indicate we're growing in this direction? |
|--|--|
| Maintain a focus on teacher professional growth. | |
| Abide by norms that guide team interactions and behaviors. | |
| Learn new and relevant information about teaching. | |
| Share leadership and responsibility. | |
| Communicate to others what we are learning and doing. | |
| Meet regularly and on schedule. | |
| Practice trusting behaviors. | |
| Work productively as a team. | |
| Apply new knowledge and skills in the classroom. | |
| Monitor student learning and success. | |

Source: Jolly, A. (2008). *Team to teach: A facilitator's guide to professional learning teams*. Oxford, OH: NSDC.

Team progress self-assessment

Directions: Circle the word that indicates how you think your team is doing for each of the following descriptors. Cold indicates you do not think the phrase describes your team at all. Hot means you think the team is doing great. Then discuss responses and fill out a chart as a team.

| As I think about our learning team: | | Cold | Cool | Lukewarm | Warm | Hot |
|-------------------------------------|--|------|------|----------|------|-----|
| 1. | We have a sense of accomplishment. | Cold | Cool | Lukewarm | Warm | Hot |
| 2. | Our team is supportive and collegial. | Cold | Cool | Lukewarm | Warm | Hot |
| 3. | We trust one another. | Cold | Cool | Lukewarm | Warm | Hot |
| 4. | We enjoy working together. | Cold | Cool | Lukewarm | Warm | Hot |
| 5. | Everyone feels accepted. | Cold | Cool | Lukewarm | Warm | Hot |
| 6. | Diverse ideas are respected. | Cold | Cool | Lukewarm | Warm | Hot |
| 7. | We are solving some problems. | Cold | Cool | Lukewarm | Warm | Hot |
| 8. | We actively listen to each other. | Cold | Cool | Lukewarm | Warm | Hot |
| 9. | We stick with our team norms. | Cold | Cool | Lukewarm | Warm | Hot |
| 10. | We have a high energy level. | Cold | Cool | Lukewarm | Warm | Hot |
| 11. | We are curious and inquisitive. | Cold | Cool | Lukewarm | Warm | Hot |
| 12. | We know where we are going. | Cold | Cool | Lukewarm | Warm | Hot |
| 13. | We are organized. | Cold | Cool | Lukewarm | Warm | Hot |
| 14. | We are learning more about teaching. | Cold | Cool | Lukewarm | Warm | Hot |
| 15. | Our meetings are productive. | Cold | Cool | Lukewarm | Warm | Hot |
| 16. | We spend more time than before talking about instruction. | Cold | Cool | Lukewarm | Warm | Hot |
| 17. | We share what we are learning with other teachers and teams. | Cold | Cool | Lukewarm | Warm | Hot |
| 18. | We hold ourselves more accountable for student learning. | Cold | Cool | Lukewarm | Warm | Hot |
| 19. | We have a feeling of shared responsibility for student learning. | Cold | Cool | Lukewarm | Warm | Hot |
| 20. | We are becoming stronger teachers. | Cold | Cool | Lukewarm | Warm | Hot |

Source: Jolly, A. (2008). *Team to teach: A facilitator's guide to professional learning teams*. Oxford, OH: NSDC.

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Tools for Learning Schools is published four times a year by Learning Forward, 504 S. Locust St., Oxford, OH 45056, for \$49 of each membership. © Copyright, Learning Forward, 2015. All rights reserved.



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We invite you to submit a proposal to share your work on effective professional learning at next year's Annual Conference in Vancouver, British Columbia. Take this opportunity to highlight your successes and challenge. Share and learn with your colleagues from across the country.

What do strong session proposals include?

- School-based presenters and co-presenters;
- Strong impact statements with evidence of growth;
- A detailed process for engagement of learners; and
- Alignment with Learning Forward's standards, vision, and strategic priorities.

Learn more about the process at
www.learningforwardconference.org/conferenceproposals.html.

Deadline: Feb. 1, 2016.



Are your PLCs truly learning-focused?



Implement the cycle of learning described in Learning Forward's bestselling book, *Becoming a Learning Team*.

Learning Forward supports schools and districts to develop cultures of learning. And we know that the heart of a learning system is the school.

We work with school and teacher leaders to set a vision for professional learning communities that ensures school-based learning teams engage in a cycle of improvement that increases their teaching effectiveness and gets results for students.

Our work focuses on teacher collaboration that is intentional and focused on the “L” in PLCs. The five-stage team learning cycle provides teacher teams with the steps toward intentional, collaborative professional learning.

Our work provides school leaders and learning teams with a model of high-quality professional learning that is long-term, sustained, and standards-driven; grounded in a cycle of continuous improvement; and capable of inspiring all to take responsibility for the learning of every adult and student in the school.

We help learning teams:

- Gain understanding of what it means for teams to work collaboratively in a cycle of continuous improvement;
- Explore each stage of the learning team cycle;
- Learn about tools and strategies for sustaining continuous learning;
- Create a learning-focused school culture that supports teachers' continuous learning.

We want to help ensure that learning is the driving force behind your PLCs. For more information, go to consulting.learningforward.org or contact Tom Manning, associate director of consulting and networks, at tom.manning@learningforward.org.