Chapter and Case Study Discussion Activities

Chapter 7: Effective Learning in Groups: Professional Learning Communities

In this chapter, we focused on implementing effective learning in groups through the use of professional learning communities (PLCs). We reviewed features of PLCs and strategies to support the launch and implementation of these communities. Use the following case study from Chapter 7, along with the questions below, to reflect on how concepts and key takeaways from the chapter apply to your professional work and setting.

Melinda glances at the clock. Twelve minutes have passed since the meeting's expected start time, but the group is still waiting for Maria, a Pre-K teacher. "Jada," Melinda asks, "do you know why Maria isn't here yet?"

Jada shrugs. "I'm not sure. Maybe she forgot because we had to cancel our meeting last week?" Melinda decides to begin because teachers from all the other Pre-K classrooms are present. Their last meeting had to be cancelled due to a conflict, so Melinda wants to use this time as efficiently as possible. "The purpose of our meeting today is to reflect on how the talk for learning strategy is working in your classrooms. The last time we met, I guess that was three weeks ago, we identified what has been going well for each of you. Today, let's start by sharing out some of the challenges you're still experiencing with bringing more academic talk and conversations into your daily practice." The teachers sit silently. Melinda glances around the table and decides to pause and provide some wait time. "Anyone have a challenge they want to share, or something that still feels hard?"

No one offers a response. One teacher scrolls through the smartphone in her lap. Another teacher glances around nervously, clearly uncomfortable. Melinda picks up on the energy and a cluster of questions begins to cloud her brain: Do they think I'm trying to evaluate them? Is this uncomfortable because I'm the director? Doesn't she know it's rude to be on her phone during a meeting? Why isn't Maria here? Just then, Maria rushes in. "I'm sorry I'm so late," she whispers breathlessly. "I didn't have coverage and Mario got picked up late. I couldn't leave him alone."

Questions for Leaders to Consider

What might the silence signal in this situation? How does the presence of Melinda, the leader, impact the group's willingness to share? Who else could facilitate this learning community?

If you typically facilitate PLCs in your setting, what worries you about removing yourself from this space? How might the environment change? What role could you play in setting this meeting up for success? How could you stay connected to the conversation?

Case Questions for Leaders to Use in Professional Learning Discussions

- Why do you think people stayed quiet when Melinda asked the staff to share challenges? What helps establish trust in professional learning communities? How would the environment change if the leader was not present in these conversations? Would that increase trust? Why or why not?

- As we read in the chapter, professional learning communities are small, collaborative teams of educators and instructional leaders who meet regularly and work toward a plan for strengthening their practice. Have you ever participated in this type of professional development? If so, how have these meetings impacted your practice?

- We learned PLCs: are small, collaborative groups of educators, have a skilled facilitator, are held on-site, and meet consistently. Why are each of these features important for peer learning? What happens if one of them is missing?

- In the case example, we saw how the PLCs lost their frequency, and we read in the chapter that PLCs need to meet frequently so the work from each meeting consistently builds toward a prioritized goal. What can you and others in your work setting do to prioritize these meetings?

- Given the four strategies described in the chapter: use a goal-driven scope and sequence, foster collaboration and supportive relationships among participants, anchor learning to concrete connections to daily practice, and engage participants as decision-makers and co-constructors of strategies, what questions do you still have about the strategies? Which of strategies would be helpful to improve the situation in the case study?

- The chapter describes how PLCs can "slowly and intentionally build up competencies that address root causes [of problems]." How do the strategies described in the chapter help to build competencies and drive change in practice?

Self-Study Activity

This discussion highlighted four strategies to build Professional Learning Communities. Next to each of the strategies below, write down how you plan to use the strategy to improve effectiveness in your work related to Professional Learning Communities.

- Use a goal-driven scope and sequence
- Foster collaboration and supportive relationships among participants
- Anchor learning to concrete connections to daily practice
- Engage participants as decision-makers and co-constructors of strategies