Many years ago when I was a student, a group of teachers in my high school, with the support of the principal and school board, decided to offer an alternative program called “the learning community.” Enrollment was by lottery, and 200 of us entered as the first class. The first day set a remarkable standard: all the teachers and students met in their respective “houses” to discuss a vision and set of values for the new school. Students were asked to generate ideas for curriculum that they were interested in pursuing. Everyone brainstormed ways to build a sense of “community.” Later that fall, I became involved as a student leader when I organized a 40-mile bike trip and in the spring developed a survey to gauge the school satisfaction levels of students, parents, and teachers. Over the next two years I wrote a book and produced an animated film, and with the help of peer-tutors caught up on math skills that had been sorely lagging. The learning community experience was the first time I found my voice as a leader and became serious as a student. I later discovered, however, that for other students the learning community was an experience in failure. They fell behind in their academics, never engaged in leadership activities, and in general simply tuned out. “The learning community” ceased being an option in my high school five years after it began.

What was the difference between my experience and my peers? Why did I suddenly bloom in this environment while others floundered? The variation in experience can be attributed not to lack of will among the teachers but to lack of knowledge and skill. Although very committed to the vision of a democratic “learning community,” they lacked the knowledge of what went on inside a student’s head much less inside a school to produce learning. They lacked the tools and processes for assessing whether students were learning, and for improving their school. Both students and schools were a relatively unknown “black box.” This wasn’t their fault; it was simply the state of education in the early 1970s.

Today we are much clearer about what’s inside that “black box” both in terms of student and adult learning. We now have valid and reliable research to support the connection between professional learning communities and improved student learning. We know what a learning community should look like and how it should function for optimal performance. In addition, we know much more about how the brain learns and the emotional role that assessment plays in building student motivation for learning. We also understand the connection between a school’s ability to engage all stakeholders in leading and learning...
and student achievement. Today educators are on the same wavelength with three very important topics of conversation: “professional learning communities,” “assessment,” and “leadership capacity.” These topics have a firm foundation in continuous improvement principles, which my colleagues and I have been helping schools and districts implement for the past eight years (and in the business arena for the previous ten). This article focuses on integrating and connecting these pieces.

**Roots in Quality**

Between the 1970s and today, many thought leaders have had a profound influence on American industry and on our schools. In particular, W. E. Deming and Peter Senge in the 1980s helped us appreciate the power of systems thinking, using data for improvement, and learning organizations. Deming shook the brains of corporate leaders when he challenged them to focus on quality by improving processes, employing the full brainpower of employees, and removing barriers to quality. Senge challenged these same leaders to stop managing their organizations as mechanistic command and control hierarchies, and instead shape a collective purpose through dialogue, examine problems in the context of systems, and value the power of teamwork to accelerate organizational learning. As corporate leaders began changing their practices and profitability returned, educational leaders began paying attention to these concepts—although their incorporation into educational practices has been slower in coming.

In 1983, Rick DuFour at Adlai Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, Illinois, was one of the first educational pioneers to begin applying Deming’s and Senge’s thinking in a school setting. Using the principles of continuous improvement as a guide, he and the staff spent many hours dialogue about the kind of school they wanted to be. From these conversations came a commonly shared purpose with a focus on student learning and high expectations for all learners. The staff created a mission and set of values that to this day guide decisions. They established goals and priorities for improvement based on a careful analysis of the current reality of their school. Collaborative time was created for teams of teachers of like-courses to establish clear learning objectives and common assessments to measure whether students were mastering the objectives. Systems were put in place to prevent students from falling behind, with extra time and attention built in for those students who needed it. Students were called upon to serve as student advisors and mentors. Teachers were called upon as leaders and learners. Today, Adlai Stevenson High School is renowned around the world for its ability to continue to produce extraordinary results; it is the standard of a “professional learning community.”

**Professional Learning Communities**

In 1995, Fred Newmann and his associates at the University of Wisconsin-Madison published groundbreaking research that proved the efficacy of professional learning communities. Newmann et al studied more than 1,400 schools over five years to determine which, if any, restructuring tool (e.g., site-based management, flexible scheduling, team teaching, school choice, alternative assessments, etc.) had the greatest impact on student achievement. The results were surprising. Newmann (1995) wrote: “The effectiveness of each education restructuring tool, either alone or in combination with others, depends on how well it organizes or develops the values, beliefs, and technical skills of educators to improve student learning (p. 1).”

Newmann went on to say, “The most successful schools were those that used restructuring tools to help them function as professional communities” (p. 3). Newmann noted that professional communities were schools with “strong organizational capacity,” characterized by:

- a clear, commonly shared purpose for student learning
- a striving for continuous improvement
- opportunities for teachers to collaborate
- collective responsibility for student learning
- authentic pedagogy

In Newmann’s study, “authentic pedagogy” referred to teaching that requires students to think critically, developing in-depth understanding of subject matter. Schools that had both the will and the skill to use “authentic pedagogy” were more successful in improving student achievement than those that did not. In a follow-up publication focusing on 22 districts across the country, Newmann (1996) confirmed that the quality of the work assigned to students, as well as the way that work was assessed, had significant impact on student achievement. Again, however, the school’s ability to deliver on the promise of authentic pedagogy was directly related to whether or not it was a professional learning community. With the help of Newmann and others, the “black box” of what makes a school great was no longer such a mystery.
Assessment for Learning

Research on student assessment and progress monitoring helped provide some answers to the other “black box” mystery of what helps students learn. One significant contribution came from the Mid-Atlantic Regional Lab. Researchers conducted a meta-analysis of more than 11,000 statistical findings correlating school factors with achievement (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1994). Second only to teachers’ ability to maintain active student participation, student achievement was improved when students were involved in monitoring their own progress through testing, revising, and evaluating learning strategies. Later, Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam (1998) examined the relationship between formative assessment and student learning. They found that when students were provided with clear targets of learning; received timely, descriptive, non-judgmental feedback; and were engaged in self-assessment and goal setting, they outperformed other students by as much as 1.0 standard deviation, with the effects greatest for low achievers. In addition to the Black and Wiliam study, many others have made the link between student motivation and assessment, debunking the myth that grades, ratings, and rankings “motivate” student achievement (Clarke, 2001; Covington, 1992; Sadler, 1989; Shepard, 2000; Stiggins, 1999).

Rick Stiggins and his associates have been committed to changing assessment practices and policies for over a decade. Basing his work on the past 15 years of assessment research, Stiggins (2002) calls upon educators to involve students “directly and deeply in their own learning, increasing their confidence and motivation to learn by emphasizing progress and achievement rather than failure and defeat” (p. 40). Stiggins distinguishes between formative assessment, which is used to promote learning; and summative assessment, which is used to evaluate whether learning has occurred. Both formative and summative assessments need to be part of a balanced assessment system. The key is to be clear about the users and uses of each type of assessment.

As with professional learning communities, the conversation about formative and summative assessment has its roots in quality principles. Deming exhorted leaders to break away from traditional notions of “quality control” where the “good” was sorted from the “bad,” and instead to measure quality earlier in the process and make improvements based on what was learned. The Japanese concept of “kaizen,” which means incremental improvement, embraces the notion of having both “process” (P) and “results” (R) measures—ways of knowing how processes are working both during the process and at the end product stage. Similarly, when teachers and students use assessment as part of the instructional process, they are using “P” measures of feedback for improvement and growth. When teachers and administrators use assessment to grade, rank, or rate performance, they are using “R” measures to evaluate mastery of learning standards. Both “P” and “R” measures are needed—just as both formative and summative assessments are needed—in order to learn and improve, but one is focused on improvement at the individual level while the other helps us improve at the system level.

Building Leadership Capacity and the Role of the Leader

When Rick DuFour began his principalship at Adlai Stevenson High School, he prided himself on his rigorous attention to individual teachers and his careful process of observing instructional practices and providing detailed, descriptive feedback to teachers on how they might improve. One of DuFour’s (2002) most significant “ahas” as a leader was when he discovered that he had been “focusing on the wrong questions.”

“I had focused on the questions, ‘What are the teachers teaching?’ and ‘How can I help them to teach it more effectively?’ Instead, my efforts should have been driven by the questions, ‘To what extent are the students learning the intended outcomes of each course?’ and ‘What steps can I take to give both students and teachers the additional time and support they need to improve learning?’” (p. 13).

DuFour goes on to say that key to building a professional learning community at Adlai Stevenson was his own transition from “instructional leader” to “lead learner.” Instead of focusing on improving teaching practices, a “lead learner focuses on creating systems, structures, policies, and frameworks to support teams of teachers in their quest to improve student learning.” This includes providing the time for teams to meet, supporting teams with the...
resources and skills they need to be successful, celebrating and recognizing progress toward goals, and always focusing on the questions “Are students learning?” and “What are we doing for those who aren’t?” Even though DuFour left the school over four years ago, Adlai Stevenson continues to receive awards and recognition for its exceptional results and solid processes. The school clearly has strong capacity, which has been sustained well past an individual leader.

The movement away from principal as the instructional leader to instead a “leader of learners” represents a significant shift in thinking. That a leader’s primary responsibility is to create systems of learning and remove systemic barriers is a concept that again has roots in the works of Deming and Senge. In Deming’s world view, employees worked in the system, while the role of managers was to work on the system, removing barriers to quality and creating an environment where there could be “joy in work.” Senge, who has spent considerable time reflecting on schools as learning organizations, believes principals and superintendents need to shape environments where there is a free flow of information, the focus is on creating what is desired, and teams learn and innovate within a shared vision of continuously improving student learning. As Senge (2001) says, this requires leaders “who are really committed to the continuous learning of everyone associated with the school” (p. 47).

While creating a learning community is a key responsibility of positional leaders, ensuring that the learning community is able to sustain high levels of performance is an even greater issue. This issue of sustainability has driven Linda Lambert’s work for more than 30 years. Now retired as a consultant, Lambert (2005) has devoted her entire career to exploring the question “Once you create a great school, how do you maintain a close approximation of that high quality for the long term?” (p. 62). In Lambert’s view, leadership is closely aligned with learning. It is not a position or a set of traits or characteristics. Rather, leadership is an energy flow that occurs when a community (team or school) of people focus on a shared purpose, using dialogue and inquiry to deepen their understanding of the issue at hand. As in Senge’s work, leadership is learning and learning is leadership. The roots of Lambert’s (2003) work can be found in democratic ideals, as demonstrated by her vision of leadership:

- Everyone has the right, responsibility, and capability to be a leader.
- The adult learning environment in the school and district is the most critical factor in evoking leadership actions.
- Within that environment, opportunities for skillful participation top the list of priorities.
- How we define leadership frames how people will participate in it.

“Leadership capacity” is a term Lambert uses to describe both the opportunities for leadership and the skillfulness of that leadership. Similar to Newmann’s “strong organizational capacity” and DuFour’s “professional learning community,” in Lambert’s 4-quadrant model, a Quadrant-4 school has broad-based, skillful leadership where everyone is a learner and everyone is a leader, including students, parents, teachers, administrators.
For Lambert, too, the building principal needs to move from being a “strong instructional leader” to being a facilitator of learning, change, and improvement. In her recent research (2005) on high leadership capacity schools, she examined three distinct phases that principals go through as the school gains in leadership capacity: instructive, transitional, and high leadership capacity. In the instructional phase, principals insisted on focusing on results, challenged existing assumptions about student learning, and established structures and processes to engage teams of teachers in improving instructional practices. During the instructional phase, principals were very assertive in their vision and beliefs, but this assertiveness faded in the second phase, as teachers began exercising more leadership. During the transitional phase, principals gradually let go of their authority and control, providing coaching and support for emerging teacher leadership. Lambert writes that this is the most challenging stage for principals; it requires being able to strategically read the culture of the school as teachers grow in their confidence as leaders, often in fits and starts.

In the third phase, the principal takes a lower profile, acting more as a facilitator and co-participant. Lambert and DuFour are clearly in agreement that the principal’s main job is to be a “learning leader” who creates the culture of a sustainable learning community.

**Learning from Experience**

Dewey believed that we build from our experiences, but Deming’s view was that we cannot learn solely from our experiences; we must have theories that we take action on to test and evaluate. In the 1970s, many educators intuitively felt that a hierarchical, mechanistic school culture was not conducive to learning. It has taken more than 30 years of research to prove why this is true and what the new learning organization should look like. Now, with data in hand, we are much better equipped to build the type of schools that are strong learning environments not only for students but also for adults. Thanks to the works of many thought leaders and researchers, we know with great certainty that when both students and adults are actively engaged in the learning process achievement improves. Fortunately as a new learning organization should look like. Now, with data in hand, we are much better equipped to build the type of schools that are strong learning environments not only for students but also for adults. Thanks to the works of many thought leaders and researchers, we know with great certainty that when both students and adults are actively engaged in the learning process achievement improves. Fortunately as a result, my experience as a student many years ago, which turned out to be such a fluke, is being replicated for many more students in schools throughout the world today.

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**References**


