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PLCs Without Borders

by Shalom Berger

One of the most powerful tools for improving schools and classrooms, according to current educational theory, is the introduction of "Professional Learning Communities" into the school environment.¹ PLCs, as they are referred to, provide the structure and opportunity for teachers to collaborate with their colleagues in planning instruction and providing support for each other and for their students. As presented by Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker,² a PLC is an organization that works to have:

- Shared mission, vision, and values.
- Collective inquiry.
- Collaborative teams.
- Action orientation and experimentation.
- Continuous improvement.
- Results orientations.

Much of the literature on Professional Learning Communities focuses on traditional school settings. The idea is a simple, intuitive one. Is it not obvious that an educational setting – one whose primary purpose is to teach and learn – should be a center of development and growth for all of its participants? And who should be the facilitators of this educational interaction, if not the teachers and administrators themselves?

Yet, all too often, a variety of impediments keeps such a community from fully developing in school settings. Intuitive (and productive) as it may be, personal and professional concerns sometimes do not allow for free exchange of ideas in every academic environment.

This note recently appeared on www.allthingsplc.info, a website and bulletin board devoted to supporting teachers and administrators who are working on implementing this methodology in their schools.

I am principal of a small school, with 1 or 2 teachers at each grade level. The collegiality/cooperation in the school is nearly nonexistent. I buy into the whole idea behind PLC's. My question – how can we accomplish this with such a small school, and with the disrespect and distance in some of the staff members?³

School size is one impediment to the successful implementation of this model – something that is true of many Jewish schools – and some schools suffer from other barriers, as well.

Allowing for Fruitful Interaction

It was this realization that led me to suggest a list-serv forum for just these sorts of conversations, in an attempt to offer Jewish educators a virtual setting that would allow for fruitful interaction in which multiple participants who share similar interests can cooperatively share, test new concepts, and grow as members of a learning community. As a virtual learning community, Lookjed has offered such a platform for more than nine years and has successfully offered a rich, stimulating environment for Jewish educators around the globe. Let me share with you a smattering of examples that illustrate the power of this medium.

Do you teach Hebrew in your school? What method do you use? Does it work as well as you would like? Who in your community has the expertise to suggest what would be the ideal method, knows what works elsewhere, and can compare and contrast different approaches?

The principal of a large Modern Orthodox high school in the Midwest turned to the Lookjed community, sharing an idea about Hebrew language instruction. Should his school, perhaps, be modeled after "bilingual schools" that have success in languages other than Hebrew? He wrote:

While doing some research for a discussion of *Ivrit b'Ivrit*, I found websites from a number of bilingual schools in the U.S. -- chiefly for French (though some for Chinese). It appears that some of them (e.g., the International School in Palo Alto, CA) are able to take children from English-speaking homes and have them end up truly bilingual (such that even what we could call "General Studies" can be given in either language) without sacrificing either academic excellence or a child-centered approach. As far as I know, there are no Jewish Day schools in North America who are so successful in *Ivrit b'Ivrit* that (for example) math and science can be offered in *Ivrit*. Frankly, I imagine we'd all be thrilled if all of our Judaic and Hebrew classes could be *Ivrit b'Ivrit*.

So my question: What do we as Jewish educators -- particularly those of us who consider ourselves Religious Zionists -- need to do in order to truly fulfill our goal of *Ivrit b'Ivrit* instruction...while also maintaining a high quality program in all areas of the school?

Why did this administrator choose this forum to discuss this issue, rather than deal with it "in-house"? The power of the Internet allows voices to be heard that simply do not sit in the faculty lounge of even the best staffed high schools. Senior professors and researchers from a number of universities responded with suggestions, recommendations, and learned analysis on these methods and their implementation. Responses ranged from pointing to research that second language instruction must begin with pre-school immersion to offering examples of the success of Hebrew language instruction in pre-War Europe and in American Zionist summer camps. (To see the discussion, go to <http://www.lookstein.org/lookjed/read.php?f=1&i=15804&t=15804>.)

Thus, a virtual learning community is powerful because it can successfully gather participants with unique expertise and experience, beyond what is found in a typical day school. It also offers another important element, one of diversity. In many cases, the staff of a Jewish day school is very homogeneous. The faculty often lives in the same communities, attended similar educational frameworks themselves, and share similar ideologies. Once they become "comfortable" with one another -- which is a positive development in many cases -- it can be hard to think "out-of-the-box," since it is a box in which everyone has become comfortable. Lookjed offers the Jewish educator a means to step outside of that "box" and hear perspectives that are radically different. It is not every day that educators in an Orthodox setting get to hear the perspective of a Conservative or Reform teacher (and obviously, vice versa, as well). The cross-pollination between American educators and their peers in other English-speaking countries and in Israel is one of the most powerful aspects of this type of forum.

Offering Different Perspectives

One area in which the ability to discuss educational approaches with fellow teachers who have a different perspective is important is teaching current events in Israel, a recurring theme for discussion on Lookjed. Two summers ago, even before the war in Lebanon erupted, I opened a discussion on educational approaches to the kidnapping of the Israeli soldier, Gilad Shalit, writing:

Those of you who have followed my contributions to Lookjed discussions about relations between Israel and the Diaspora know that I perceive educational settings as important venues for cementing ties between Jewish

young people around the world.

In the course of discussions that have taken place in the past, the point has been raised that when Israel is always presented as a war-torn nation in which people live in fear of war and terrorist acts, it has the opposite effect, as it gives the impression that Israel is not a place where people can live normal lives. It is essential for Jewish educators to be sensitive to this issue, and respond to it by taking opportunities to accentuate all of the wonderful things that go on in Israel on a daily basis.

Nevertheless, we know that there are two things that bring family together in a show of support and solidarity -- events of a celebratory nature such as childbirth, weddings, and graduations, and those of a tragic nature, like illness or death. By coming together in good times as well as bad, supportive family relationships are created, the kind of relationships we would like to encourage our students to have with their fellow Jews around the world.

Responses to this discussion included suggestion of curricular materials prepared both in Israel and in the United States; suggestions on how to follow and present news about Israel to our students; and general statements of support, consolation, and understanding on the part of Diaspora educators. Similar on-list conversations take place regularly when Israel is in the news.

(To see the discussion, go to

<http://www.lookstein.org/lookjed/read.php?f=1&i=13263&t=13263>]

For other Israel-themed discussion, see

<http://www.lookstein.org/lookjed/read.php?f=1&i=4576&t=4576> and

<http://www.lookstein.org/lookjed/read.php?f=1&i=5521&t=5521>

where Israel's disengagement from Gaza was discussed, or use the search function at <http://www.lookstein.org/lookjed/> .)

Providing Anonymity

I have illustrated that a forum like Lookjed is useful because it widens participation and brings to the "learning community" experts and experienced educators who otherwise could not be brought into the conversation. On occasion, another positive aspect of a moderated discussion list is the opportunity it offers to turn to colleagues and peers anonymously. Although the overwhelming majority of Lookjed participants identify themselves and the schools with which they are affiliated, occasionally, in my capacity as moderator, I receive posts that come with a request for anonymity.

One recent example is that of an administrator who raised a question about how schools deal with the common practice today of students sharing personal information on public Internet forums like [MySpace](#) or [FaceBook](#). This phenomenon raises concern on a number of levels, not the least of which -- as pointed out by a Lookjed participant -- is that MySpace made national headlines last year when it was discovered that the community contained hundreds of convicted sex offenders, including pedophiles.

Responses to this query came fast and furious. Suggested "best practices" included running a program for parents to raise awareness of the issues involved, bringing an outside expert in to run seminars for the students, encouraging use of a website called [CovenantEyes.com](#) that allows students to assign a mentor to their browser who will receive a daily list of all sites that the student visited, and more. This conversation also encouraged list participants to discuss these issues with their students and children -- who, in this case, are the true "experts" regarding the use of these media. The option to share their comments anonymously allowed those important statements to be posted without impinging on the students' privacy.

As often happens, the discussion of MySpace and FaceBook segued to another, related topic, namely how schools should react to the use of a site called [RateMyTeacher.com](#), where students are offered the opportunity to rate their teachers and share comments about them. Perhaps surprisingly, among the responses to this site were several positive ones, where

educators argued that student evaluations can and should be accepted as constructive criticism, which students are asked to share all too infrequently. The most powerful argument in this direction was voiced by a teacher who wrote:

I had never heard of the site, and went to take a look-see. As a parent and teacher in the school I was curious what the kids thought. I'd say their comments are 90% right on. Only one or two did I think were off-base. The teachers who are really good got the ratings to reflect it; the ones who were abysmal ditto. I think this site could be extremely useful if viewed as a "performance review" from students. From time to time I give end-of-the-year questionnaires to my students, and ask for feedback about what they thought worked well, what didn't, and ideas to improve the learning experience for them. I've gotten some great ideas and suggestions from them. Don't look at it as *chutzpa*, think of the site as a cry for help from some of them. After all, we were all students once, and had some winners and some zingers, right?

That teacher closed the post by saying

For obvious reasons, I think this post should be anonymous.

(To see this discussion in full, go to

<http://www.lookstein.org/lookjed/read.php?f=1&i=15135&t=151355.>)

Many of the roles that various players take on in traditional PLCs are found among the Lookjed participants, as well. Consistent readers recognize the names of regular contributors and can name the people who are resource providers, which ones are specialists in curriculum or instruction, who takes on the role of mentor, and who is always ready to suggest a radical change in the way things are usually done in a day school.

A "Virtual Professional Learning Community"

Lookjed, as a "virtual professional learning community," can never take the place of actual, in-school opportunities for collaborative efforts to enhance faculty partnerships, team learning, and shared vision that will make a difference in the school culture. Nevertheless, a list-serve that has succeeded in creating a community that offers opportunities to meet people with similar interests and to exchange ideas with peers with whom dreams and disappointments can be shared can act as a place of growth and development for many teachers.

In the words of one Lookjed subscriber:

I've been meaning to thank you as a passive participant of Lookjed for quite a few years. Questions and ideas discussed on the list often make it to my *Shabbat* table or relate to personal experiences, and the e-mail list has provided a fantastic place for reference and support. I also find it to be one of the few places where practical Israeli-American dialogue takes place without the traditional Babylon-versus-Israel dependency/hierarchy roles. Connecting so many Jewish educators across the spectrum really has an impact.

Whether or not your school has a supportive Professional Learning Community, I invite you to broaden your horizons as a Jewish educator by joining the conversation that takes place on Lookjed. An on-line registration form appears at <http://www.lookstein.org/register.htm>.

Endnotes:

1. The Fall 2007 issue of the Lookstein Center's professional journal, *Jewish Educational Leadership*, is devoted to Professional Learning Communities and their place in Jewish schools. For information on the journal, see www.lookstein.org/online_journal_toc.php?id=9.
2. DuFour, R. & R. Eaker. *Professional learning communities at work: Best practices for enhancing student achievement*. Bloomington, IN: National Educational Service and Alexandria, VA: Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1998.
3. See <http://www.allthingsplc.info/wordpress/?p=344>

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