

Layered Curriculum®, PLCs, and PRtI: A Perfect Fit

Steve Ritter

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A recent trend in education has been the introduction of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) into school cultures. Another recent trend going hand-in-hand with PLCs is utilizing a Pyramid Response to Interventions (PRtI). In both cases, the focus for teachers is the students' learning. This learning involves providing the students with the best instruction, regular and reliable assessment, and a well-rounded educational experience. Layered Curriculum® provides opportunities for students to experience all of these. Layered Curriculum®, if utilized correctly, can satisfy the needs of these cultural models to ensure all students can learn.

PLCs are designed to create a school-wide culture to enable high levels of student achievement. Through the incorporation of collaboration, the entire faculty becomes responsible for every child's learning. Buffum, Mattos, and Weber (2009) stated, "a staff must...create a collective response in which core instruction and supplemental support form a learning continuum to meet the individual needs of every student" (p. 48). In a PLC, it is the responsibility of all faculty members to ensure that every student succeeds. PLCs focus on three big ideas: ensuring that all students learn, a culture of collaboration, and a focus on results (DuFour, 2004). These concepts run parallel to the goals of PRtI.

Buffum, Mattos, and Weber (2009) and Fisher and Frey (2010) contended that in the first tier of PRtI all students should be exposed to a high quality curriculum with high quality instruction. Buffum, Mattos, and Weber stated "the most important step a school can take to improve core program is differentiated instruction and small-group activities" (p. 74). They also stated teachers needed to focus on essential, or power standards; collect and analyze assessment data; and incorporate interventions in other tiers of PRtI to allow re-teaching of content for students who do not show mastery. Fisher and Frey stated that "without high-quality initial instruction, significant numbers of student will require supplemental instruction and intensive

intervention that are costly and time-consuming” (p. 29). Fisher and Frey also recommended the learning process consist of identifying goals, modeling what students should accomplish, use guided learning activities, well-structured independent tasks, and an assessment of student learning. All five of these steps can be completed within Layered Curriculum® units.

Dr. Kathie Nunley’s Layered Curriculum® aligns itself very well with many of the goals of PLCs and PRtI. Based on Fisher and Frey’s (2010) recommendation, Layered Curriculum® can provide opportunities for each of the five steps for a high-quality learning process. It is in the structured independent tasks for which Layered Curriculum® can provide students with a unique experience. Fisher and Frey cautioned readers against the use of homework for students to gain new knowledge. Within the Layered Curriculum® model, class time can be utilized for independent tasks where students have an opportunity to demonstrate mastery. If they are unable to demonstrate mastery, then the opportunity for re-teaching or re-examining the content can take place. Furthermore, the assessment piece of Layered Curriculum® provides the ideal opportunity for fully comprehending what each student has or has not learned.

One of the most important elements of PLCs, PRtI, and Layered Curriculum® is the ability to examine assessment data. With Layered Curriculum®, accountability for learning is ensured with every student through the use of oral defenses and one-on-one interactions between the teacher and the student (Nunley, 2004). Oral defense is used by the teacher to ensure the student has gained the appropriate amount of knowledge and skills to meet the desired outcomes of the district’s curriculum. An example of using oral defense would be to assess a student’s knowledge of the content on a worksheet. Instead of merely grading multiple-choice questions, the teacher asks the student a series of questions about the material on the worksheet. The student will receive a grade based on his/her knowledge of the material. This cuts down on

students getting a grade for simply getting something done. This also eliminates copying or cheating off another student. The student is responsible for his/her knowledge of the material (Nunley). Completing oral defenses in a one-on-one setting also provides the teacher an opportunity that when a student does not master the content the teacher can utilize the time for a re-teaching experience. Preferably, the teacher would allow the student more time to review the material, return, and better demonstrate the desired skills or knowledge. Flexible scheduling and timing of oral defenses can foster a greater frequency of opportunities for re-teaching and re-learning. Instead of waiting for students to fail and enter into the second or third tiers of interventions, teachers can begin the process on a regular basis within the everyday classroom environment.

On the other hand, all classrooms have students who excel in content. Another concept for PLCs and PRTI is how to address students who have mastered the content. In Layered Curriculum®, these students can progress to the next layer and continue the learning process. This would allow those students to gain more experience “playing” with what they have learned (“B Layer”) and thinking critically about real-world issues related to what they have learned (“A Layer”). However, students who have excelled can also become tutors in the classroom to assist the teacher in the re-teaching process. Engaging students to teach another student or to assist other students in their preparations for oral defenses can lead to the small group activities on a regular basis that Buffum, Mattos, and Weber (2009) stated produced the most core program improvements. This can create a collaborative environment within the classroom amongst the students where they take the responsibility for all their peers to learn and be successful.

As Buffum, Mattos, and Weber (2009) stated, “a staff must...create a collective response in which core instruction and supplemental support form a learning continuum to meet the

individual needs of every student” (p. 48). According to Nunley (2006), Layered Curriculum® is a three-layer model that encourages higher-order thinking as students progress through the layers of C, B, and A. The purpose of the “C Layer” is to check for basic knowledge and understanding where the students will build upon the level of information they possess on the topic. This layer is especially created to meet the wide variety of needs of the students in the classroom and is where differentiation of instruction, activities, and assignments can be especially implemented. Assignments and activities are created for auditory, visual, and tactile learning styles. The “C Layer” can also include assignments and activities for students with special needs, gifted students, English language learners (ELL), and any other classification of student in the classroom. The “B Layer” uses more application of the information learned in the “C Layer.” Many of the tasks include problem solving or other higher order thinking tasks. The “A Layer” involves critical thinking and analysis of the information that requires the highest levels of thinking and learning. With each step, the students gain a new experience with what they have learned in the classroom.

Nunley's (2006) process also involves giving the students ownership in the classroom. Students are able to choose the types of assignments they want to complete from each layer. As previously mentioned, the “C Layer” is especially differentiated to meet the needs of the variety of learning styles of the students in the classroom. In order to differentiate the classroom for every student, Layered Curriculum® allows the students to choose the method of learning that best fits them, as well as gives them the opportunity to take ownership or command of their educational process (Nunley). The student is able to select the activities and/or assignments which best suites their learning style. Nunley (2004) contended also that by giving some of the control to the students, classroom management issues and discipline issues are reduced

dramatically. This can create a classroom culture where learning is the priority and can be the focus for the students and the teacher.

Having examined the components of Layered Curriculum®, it is vital to discuss what is required before planning of a unit begins. The critical first step (Fisher & Frey, 2009; Nunley 2004) is to identify the essential learning goals for students. It is necessary for teachers to determine the essential learning goals for students to master the course content and have a quality learning experience. Once those goals are established, creation of various assignments to fit into the sections of Layered Curriculum® can begin. It should be through collaboration that essential standards should be determined for students (Buffum, Mattos, & Weber, 2009; Fisher & Frey, 2009). In this “meeting of the minds,” best practices for instruction and assessment should also be shared to maximize student potential and growth. In the words of Clinton High School Principal Frank Dahman, “individually we’re smart, but collectively we’re geniuses” (personal correspondence). These ideas can all be incorporated into Layered Curriculum® units with the focus of all assignments and activities being based around best practices and essential standards.

There are many opportunities for Layered Curriculum®, PLCs, and PRtI to come together. Differentiating the classroom instruction and assessment through Layered Curriculum® can lead to improved results in the classroom. It is this concept of assessment and results for all three models that is the key. Layered Curriculum® provides an opportunity for teachers to truly discover what their students have learned while providing opportunities for students to be re-taught and learn content. Students who have demonstrated a mastery of the content can continue in the learning process by progressing to the next layer or becoming engaged in enrichment or tutoring activities. From this method of assessment, a more accurate plan can be put into place for students who continue to struggle. Students can be moved into the second and third tiers of

the pyramid knowing that the proper steps have been taken at the first level to ensure they have received differentiated instruction, an effective and accurate assessment, and an opportunity to be re-taught. Layered Curriculum® in itself can be the first step for interventions.

## Works Cited

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