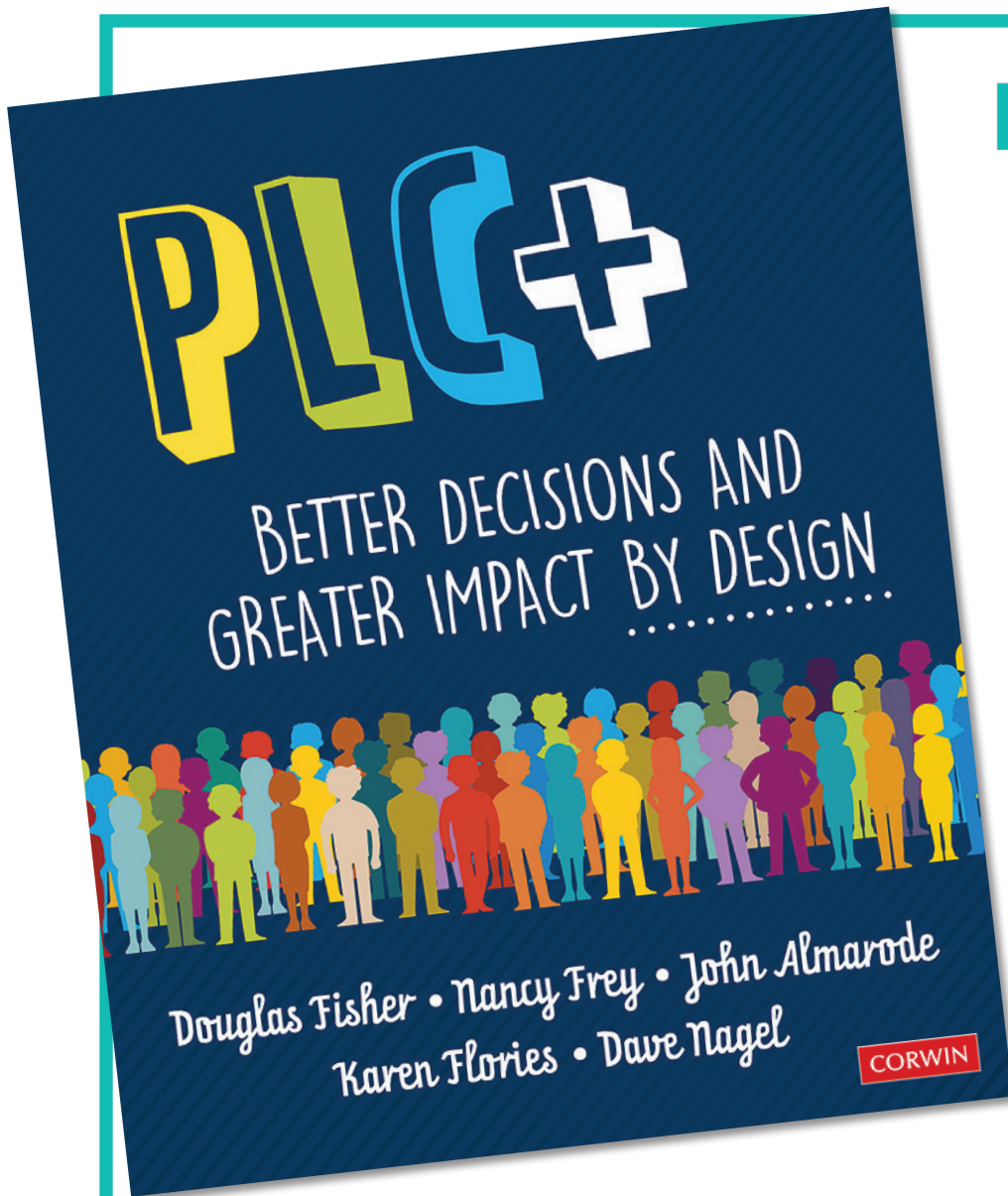


CORWIN PLC+



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Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from *PLC+: Better Decisions and Greater Impact by Design*. This excerpt emphasizes that the heartbeat of a PLC+ rests in the quality time members invest in one another engaged in inquiry of their practices, which may be accomplished through such practices as Learning Walks.

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## LEARNING WALKS

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Time is precious for every classroom teacher, and finding the time to spend in each other's classrooms can be a challenge. Yet isolating oneself professionally comes at a much higher cost—a “pathway to burnout” (Schlichte, Yssel, & Merbler, 2005, p. 35). Teaching has long been described as isolating, and the adults in the classroom spend a comparatively low portion of their day in the company of peers. This can chip away at feelings of self-efficacy, not to mention collective efficacy. An important hallmark of successful professional learning communities is that members carve out time to spend with one another in classrooms. Keep in mind that PLC+ teams are *not* groups that meet only on early release days. The heartbeat of a PLC+ rests in the quality time members invest in one another engaged in inquiry of their practices. Time spent in each other's classrooms is an essential part of this equation.

Learning walks are an effective method for exploring common challenges identified by a PLC+. Learning walks differ from instructional rounds (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009) in their scope and their formality. Unlike instructional rounds, which use protocols for establishing long-term networks, defining problems of practice, and formally analyzing patterns, learning walks are more loosely structured. As with the use of video for professional learning, these “walks” require professional learning and practice. For example, those teachers engaging in learning walks must learn to discern between descriptive and evaluative statements. Also, learning walks are *most effective* when focused on specific problems of practice (POP). In some cases, the host teacher determines the POP. In others, it is jointly determined by the PLC+.

### Ghost Walks

Visiting empty classrooms is a great way to conduct a learning walk, especially for PLC+ teams that have not conducted learning walks before. PLC+ members make their classrooms available during a prep period and in turn are participants in the ghost walk, where the observation is confined to discussion about the physical environment. Baldwin Elementary School was focused on getting better

at communicating learning intentions and success criteria to students. Teachers in the primary grades PLC+ used a ghost walk to see how their colleagues accomplished this with emergent readers.

## Capacity-Building Learning Walk

Some learning walks are conducted expressly for the purpose of gathering evidence to inform decisions. A PLC+ team at Baldwin Elementary uses capacity-building learning walks with faculty who are new to their school. PLC+ colleagues are paired with the new teachers so that they can discuss how PLC+ efforts are evidenced in classrooms. Ms. Salisbury accompanied first-grade teacher Xavier Dias on a capacity-building learning walk focused on teacher modeling of expert thinking.

“Mr. Dias wasn’t really familiar with teacher modeling when he arrived here at Baldwin,” explained Ms. Salisbury. “So we went to three classrooms during rotations, when our students were at art or P.E.,” she said. “It was prearranged, and he got to see three teachers doing a think-aloud to model their expert thinking in real time,” she said.

Mr. Dias added, “It helped me tremendously. I’ve read transcripts of think-alouds, but seeing the interactions between teacher and students gave me a better sense of it. I’ll be trying it out tomorrow.”

The third- and fifth-grade teachers at Red Canyon Elementary School conducted a capacity-building learning walk with Tori Maldonado, a member of the fourth-grade PLC+, to learn more about the logistics of dyad reading. The third- and fifth-grade teachers were energized by the findings shared by their fourth-grade colleagues on pairing readers to jointly read more complex texts, but they still had questions regarding implementation. “It’s actually simpler than I imagined,” said one third-grade teacher, “and it was helpful to talk with a few students about their impressions.”

## Faculty Learning Walks

Ideally, each teacher participates in two each year. In many cases, this can be achieved by coordinating planning periods so that coverage is not an issue. Teachers are therefore grouped by

convenience, but this in itself can create interesting conversations among teachers who don't otherwise have much contact with one another. Teachers often come away with ways to innovate in their own classrooms, and even to form new partnerships. A series of learning walks concerning the practice of close reading of complex texts resulted in an interdisciplinary lesson between science and English teachers. Students read and discussed a passage written by Charles Darwin twice in a two-day span. Their English teacher used the passage to discuss how the author of *The Origin of Species* used claim, evidence, and reasoning to forward a theory of evolution. Their biology teacher focused on the content of the passage and its connection to a groundbreaking insight that changed the life sciences. (See Figure 4.4 for a summary of these learning walks.)

Learning walks are best conducted with some boundaries in mind, lest they devolve into the kind of judgmental discourse many teachers fear. Participation is always voluntary, and teachers who open their classrooms to such visits always receive advance notice. Visitors meet in advance with a facilitator from their professional learning community who revisits expectations and purpose and who reminds PLC+ members to refrain from taking notes, as it can raise anxiety levels. We take steps to ensure that the teachers whose classrooms are visited get opportunities to serve as members of a learning walk team as well, no matter how well acquainted faculty are with the learning walks or walk-through process.

After spending a short time in each classroom (no more than 15 minutes, and often less), they meet again to engage in a reflective conversation led by the activator. They are asked what they noticed, what was surprising, and what was held in common with their own practice. The activator moderates so that the conversation doesn't become evaluative and stays focused on the learning of the teachers. Importantly, this reflective conversation must end with teachers sharing insights they have made about their own classrooms. Time is reserved at the next PLC+ gathering for observers and host teachers to share their impressions with one another.

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Video must serve as fodder for the discussion a teacher has with another, encouraging the teacher to notice the moves he or she is making as well as the impact those moves have on student learning.

The quest for better learning should not be limited to instructional strategies and tools that teachers can implement. Rather, peers, coaches, and administrators can use microteaching to foster honest

**FIGURE 4.4** Types of Learning Walks

Type of Walk	Purpose	Recommended Time	Participants	Follow-Up After the Walk
Ghost Walk	This walk is to examine classrooms without students present. Teachers volunteer to make their classrooms available, and in turn are participants in the ghost walk. The focus of the observation is about the physical learning environment.	1 hour	Principal, assistant principal, teachers, building leadership team, coaches, professional learning community.	Summary of data collected: evidence and wonderings processed with entire faculty.
Capacity-Building Learning Walks	This walk focuses solely on collecting data to inform decisions. Collection of data and evidence helps identify the implementation of effective practices and gain insights into next steps.	1 hour	Principal, assistant principal, coaches, and other members of the building's leadership team.	Summary of data collected: evidence and wonderings processed with entire faculty.
Faculty Learning Walks	The goal of this learning walk is to focus on the learning of the whole staff. It involves all teachers in visiting other teachers' classrooms outside of the PLC+ to which members belong. This can spark new ideas and strategies for teachers to incorporate into their own practice.	All day	Principal, assistant principal, and whoever is available each period and/or time segment, ultimately involving entire faculty throughout the year.	Summary of data collected: evidence and wonderings processed with entire faculty.

and reflective conversations. We did not say that these conversations would be easy. In fact, our colleague Jennifer Abrams (2016) notes that they are often hard conversations. But evidence-based conversations can be consequential, impacting both the teachers' teaching and the students' learning.

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