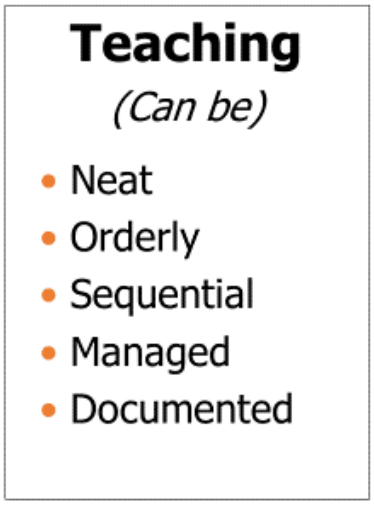
Grade Level Meeting or PLC

Teacher: *"I used to go to a grade-level meeting and now I go to a PLC. What's the difference?"*

Professional Learning Communities are more focused on learning than on teaching.

At grade-level meetings the conversation is mostly about teaching: looking at pacing guides, assessment dates, available resources, ordering materials and scheduling activities. But when we're in a PLC, the conversation is focused mostly on learning.

I have found many schools are overly focused on teaching. "Why would schools get overly and focused on teaching?" I decided the answer was teaching can be neat, orderly, sequential, managed and documented.



When the State Department tells you, "Here's what kids must master in seventh-grade math, you can put 180 boxes on the wall, pick up the State Department list and spread it out all over the 180 boxes and now you have a scope and sequence.

Then you can tell the principals that it's critical that teachers do everything that's on the scope and sequence, so a

principal can require teachers to prepare lesson plans which have identified the standards they are addressing on each day. As a teacher, you're pretty sure they're going to check up on you so immediately after having taught the standard, you assess it. You now have proof that you taught it.

Often, we try to identify that an assessment, immediately after having taught content, documents learning. It does not document learning; it documents teaching. Why? Because learning tends to be messy, spontaneous, irregular, nonlinear and complex.

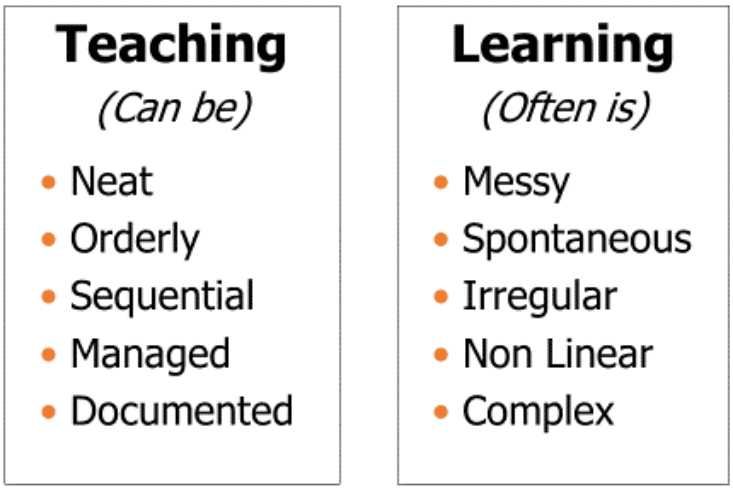
I learned this early in my teaching career. I was teaching fifth grade and I learned very quickly as a fifth-grade teacher you better keep some samples of your students' assessments, because somewhere next year a sixth-grade teacher is going to ask "What did you do? Skip that whole unit on fractions?" I'd go right to the file, "Hey, look at this. They knew fractions when they were with me. I don't know what happened but they knew when they were here."

Then I moved to grade six and had many of the children I had the year before. I found myself looking in the mirror asking, "What did you do? Skip that fractions unit last year?" I was taking the filed test and giving it back to the kids, "Look at

this, you knew this last year." That's when I found out that that immediate testing following instruction seldom measures internalization and learning.

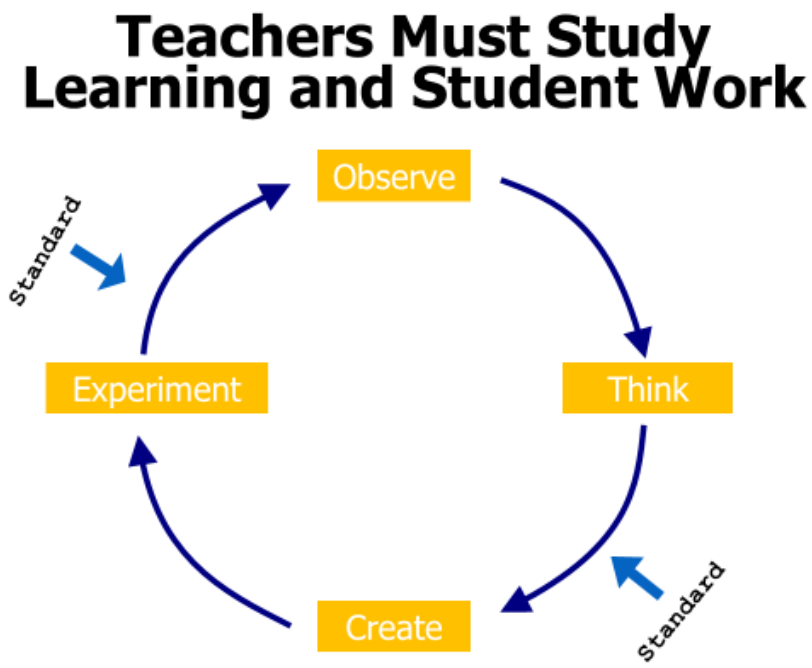
If you are giving some pre-assessments as the school year begins, consider passing the results to last year's teachers. This exchange is one of the benefits I find in vertical PLCs. The following year's teacher is a great source of information about what students learned with you. What students retain the following year is a pretty good indicator of learning. If I find my students knew the content for my assessment but don't have it next year, I may want to teach the content differently this year.

I believe the struggle for teachers between a focus on teaching and a focus on learning should drive much of a PLC's conversations.



When I struggled with how I lead teachers into this conversation, it struck me that teaching really is a job of studying learning and studying student work.

Teaching is about observing, thinking, creating, and experimenting in an ongoing cycle.



Imagine it's August and you're teaching freshmen English. Since you don't know much about the students, you're going to start at the thinking spot. You're going to think to yourself, "Who do I think is coming to freshmen English? What do I know from my past background, experience, knowledge?"

Then you will look at the standards that the students need to meet and thinking about who's coming, you begin the create stage and ideas emerge.

I'm going to explore a problem-based approach.

This is a novel I'm going to select for kids.

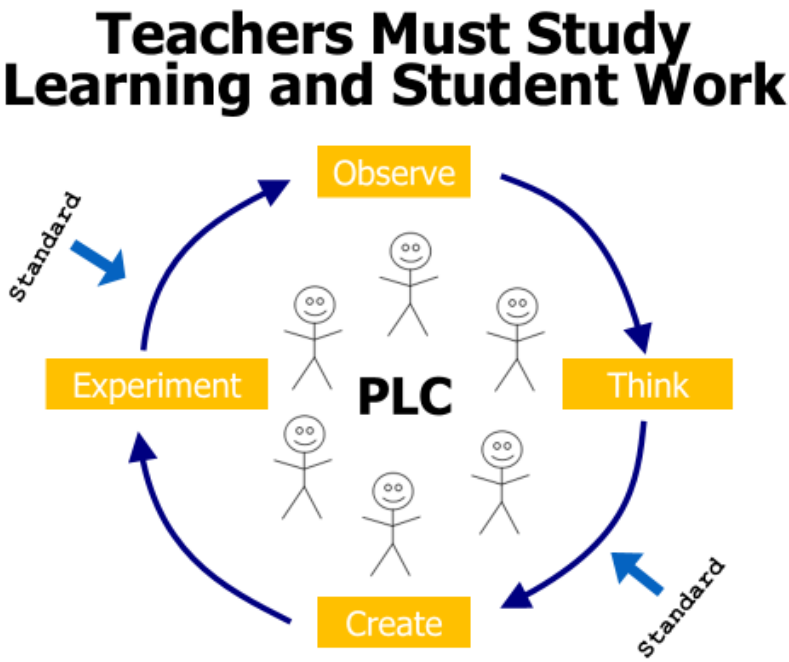
Here's a question I'm going to have on the board as they walk in.

Here's an opening icebreaker activity.

When yellow buses show up, the experiment begins. You engage the learners in what you created. As soon as you engage them, you start observing what happens. At some point, you start bringing the standards back into play and some informal

assessment begins. As you are observing what's happening, you start thinking about what you are observing. You might draw a conclusion… "The wrong kids came!" You now start re-creating!

Or, what you created worked perfectly for 90% of the students and you have 10% of the students for whom that creation was insufficient. Now you are into the creation process for those students.



Our job as an instructional leader is to increase teachers' observation, thinking, creativity and experimentation. PLC's should engage teachers in the continuous learning process that impacts their student learning. How do you support teachers in PLC process?