

Opinion & Perspective

PLCs, Control, and Professional Dialogue: A Response to Sosa and Casanave

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I would like to start by thanking Sosa and Casanave (2008), for taking the time to comment on my article (Venema, 2007) about Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). While they were critical of PLCs, a debate is always preferable to disinterest. The reality is that there can be no final word, and I hope the discussion on this issue will be ongoing.

The title of their article ("Against Control: An Essay") was in itself revealing, and they are also clear about their terminology: "we use "control" in a negative sense, as a top-down concept that works against the flexibility, diversity, and unpredictability we hope to nourish in our teaching" (pp. 168-169).

However, while the points raised were legitimate in a general discussion on education and curriculum, they also reflected critical misunderstandings of PLCs, as well as a tendency to highlight extreme scenarios as the norm. For the sake of brevity, I will refrain from attempting to define once again what PLCs are. However, I recommend the following articles to those who are interested in reading further: Deming (2000), Hargreaves (2003), Hord (2004), DuFour (2005).

Sosa and Casanave have three overlapping objections to PLCs and the control they impose on teachers and students:

1. By focusing on testing PLCs impose constraining standards on

teachers and students.

2. PLCs promote standardized teaching that works to stifle creativity and teacher development.
3. The uniform approach to teaching advocated by PLCs is unlikely to succeed given the complexity of teaching and learning.

They then conclude with an example taken from Sosa's own classroom experience, which I will respond to before moving on to address each of the objections above.

Sosa's classroom example

The example given by Sosa and Casanave regarding classroom innovations is a revealing one. The "syllabus" simply provides a textbook and the rather sweeping request that students should be encouraged to "talk, write, and read." Understandably, the textbook appears to become the *de facto* syllabus and there are numerous references to it, from combining chapters 1 and 6 in the first class (p. 180), to covering "the material from two chapters in one week" (p. 181). There is no mention of learning goals nor is there any indication of how student learning was assessed beyond their level of engagement in the classroom, a legitimate but limited means of assessing learning. There also appears to be very little guidance for teachers regarding student needs, requiring quite radical innovations ten minutes into the first class. Sosa's adaptations in such a context were creative but there is no indication that they were shared with other teachers, or that Sosa was dialoguing with other teachers to learn how they were adapting to a less than ideal teaching situation. Let's imagine a different situation, one that would be more typical of a PLC:

1. Instead of simply selecting a textbook all the teachers involved in the first-year course could work together to come up with

some kind of consensus regarding critical learning goals. These objectives would necessarily be more defined than the goal that students “speak, read, and write English” and would be based on perceived student needs.

2. Teachers would discuss the means by which learning would be assessed, again vis-à-vis the learning goals of the course. Teachers would continuously monitor progress over the course and openly share their findings with each other.
3. Teachers would engage in a continuing dialogue regarding problems they encounter as well as innovations that prove successful. They would openly discuss whether, and how, the goals of the course were being met. In the event that they were not being met they would discuss, and implement, possible ways to address the learning gap.
4. There would need to be leadership from at least one full-time teacher and/or teacher coordinator to facilitate the discussion. The administration would be involved in allocating time and space for the teachers to meet. There would also be a system to ensure that the lessons learned would not be lost in the succeeding year to future teachers, should they happen to change.

For most universities in Japan this would require both structural and cultural changes. The structural changes would include the development of common objectives and teacher teams as well as the allocation of time and resources to allow teachers, both full-time and part-time, to meet outside of class. The cultural changes would include a renewed focus on education and atmosphere that encourages collaborative dialogue and reflective teaching practice. No doubt the necessary changes would present serious, and even insurmountable, hurdles for many tertiary language programs in Japan. I can also see that, for teachers determined to maintain the complete autonomy of

their classrooms, this process would present an unwelcome intrusion. What I fail to see is how this process could be simply dismissed as a constraining means of control that prescribes and limits teachers.

I shall now move on to addressing Sosa and Casanave's three main objections to PLCs regarding issues of testing, standardized teaching, and the complexity of teaching and learning.

Testing

Implicit in PLCs is that teachers' actions are guided by measurements of student learning. According to Casanave and Sosa:

This ordinarily means that evidence of successful teaching and learning is represented by means of numbers and fixed categories, such as so-called objective tests that can be graded (and given) by computers and by means of check-list evaluation forms. (p. 171)

Casanave and Sosa have equated the measurement of learning in PLCs with broad standardized testing. All subsequent criticisms have little relevance given the nature of the measurement described in PLCs as timely, if not continuous, and as specific to locally determined objectives. In fact, Hargreaves (2003) quite passionately advocates PLCs as an alternative to standardized testing. The reality is, and always will be, that the vast majority of assessment going on in classrooms falls far outside the scope of standardized testing. What standardized test would be appropriate to measure the success of, say, a first-year conversation class? What PLCs would also ask is that the measurement is done by teams of teachers working towards converging goals. As for the kinds of measurement that occurs – that would obviously depend on the learning goals. As Sosa and Casanave actually point out, "projects, portfolios, discussions, and presentations all show what

students can do in their L2" (p. 176). To provide an example, a PLC process of assessing learning in a presentation class could evolve as follows:

- A group of teachers within a given language program or school would meet to discuss the kind of presentation(s) they would like students to be able to do. They would discuss the critical abilities involved in those presentations.
- Teachers would work together to develop a preliminary set of rating scales to evaluate student presentations, as well as other means of assessment.
- For the final class teachers could swap classes to grade the students in another teacher's class or combine classes to jointly evaluate presentations.

This process would probably involve more time on the part of teachers. However, what we are not talking about here is the inappropriate and inflexible use of standardized tests to evaluate local results.

One can also imagine where broad standardized tests, much maligned by Sosa and Casanave, such as TOEIC, would yield useful data. Take, for example, our department where students have been taking the TOEIC IP test twice a year for the past three years. The results consistently show the majority of students achieving nearly double the score in the listening section that they achieve in the reading section. One doesn't have to be a fervent advocate of the TOEIC test to draw the conclusion that our department would benefit from the incorporation of more reading across the curriculum. Future TOEIC scores could provide an indication of the success of these reading innovations.

Standardized teaching

Sosa and Casanave also criticized PLCs as imposing artificial consensus on teachers and a standardized form of “fast food education” (p. 174). Here it once again appears that they have failed to understand the basic principles of PLCs. If teachers are constantly reflecting on their teaching practices and their measurable effect on learning, then making adjustment to respond to learning and/or the lack of it, how could they possibly be following lock-step to prefabricated teaching practices? One suspects, once again, that Sosa and Casanave are reflexively responding to something other than PLCs. They quote Tarnoczi (2006) who argues, much more subtly, that the discourse of PLCs actively discourages conflicting beliefs and teacher practices. Tarnoczi’s view of PLCs is strikingly different from that of Hargreaves who argues that PLCs are not:

sappy enclaves of easy agreement. They demand ...a ‘grown up’ profession, with grown-up professional norms of teaching, ...where professional disagreement is embraced and enjoyed, rather than avoided; and where conflict is seen as a necessary part of professional learning, not a fatal act of betrayal. (p. 7)

PLCs are realized in communities of teachers and are subject to all the politics that human beings bring to their relations, particularly in the workplace. One can imagine a hard-headed principal, or teacher coordinator for that matter, hijacking these groups to pursue an agenda, but the same could be said for pretty much any educational innovation. What then is the alternative? Shall we refrain from any teacher dialogue in which one teacher’s view could conflict with and conceivably be imposed on another’s? One could argue that PLCs offer the opportunity to mediate these dialogues, not on the basis of broad educational agendas or pre-scripted teaching practices, but on the basis of which teaching practices result in localized learning. Does

this mean teachers will, at times, be challenged to reconsider their teaching practices? Absolutely. This is called *professional development* or, if you will, *learning*.

The complexity of learning

A related argument by Sosa and Casanave is that PLCs, in their efforts to exert control over teachers and teaching practices, are incapable of dealing with the inherently complex teaching/learning process. Here they quote from articles on chaos-complexity theory. I would suspect that for most teachers it comes as no surprise that language learning is a complex and often unpredictable process, not amenable to simplistic educational trends. Are Sosa and Casanave claiming that the only response to the complexity of the process is for every teacher to go it alone, without the constraints of professional dialogue, curricular goals, or any kind of assessment? Is teaching and language acquisition so complex a process that all previous training and experience is rendered useless when a teacher enters a new classroom? If this is not the case, would it not be fair to suggest that the accumulated efforts of teachers working together are more effective than everyone going it alone? Why the assumption that working towards consensus on learning goals serves to stifle teacher innovations? If teachers are incapable of reaching a reasonable consensus regarding student needs and learning goals, how can we expect students to understand what they are trying to achieve? Besides, is it not true that clear goals can work towards facilitating rather than stifling innovations?

Let's return to the presentation class discussed earlier. A teacher with a background in formal debate may be able to apply some of that rigor and structure to facilitate coherent and cohesive student presentations. Conversely, a teacher with a background in drama may also learn to apply drama in the classroom to facilitate effective communication and creativity in presentations. Is it not likely that both these teachers

have something to offer each other, as well as other teachers, in teaching ideas and techniques that will ultimately facilitate student learning across classrooms? Of course, this would require openness to new ideas and the willingness to improvise and experiment. This is precisely what it means to be involved in a professional community, to read journals such as this one, and to attend conferences. All PLCs ask is that this sort of professional community be imbedded in a local context where, one would imagine, it would be most relevant.

Conclusion

Finally, I would like to make it clear that I am not pushing for the immediate implementation of PLCs in all tertiary teaching situations in Japan. As mentioned in my original article (Venema, 2007), context will ultimately be the determining factor in the relevance and feasibility of PLCs. There are also some legitimate issues to be worked out, including the kind of leadership required, the increased demands on teacher time, as well as the relative accountability of tertiary students in contrast to the primary and secondary school students that predominate in discussions of PLCs. However, Sosa and Casanave's description of PLCs as an inflexible and simplistic means of control is neither accurate nor fair, and before proceeding further with the discussion we do need to take care that we are actually discussing the same thing.

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