

Thinking tool

Genuine versus pseudo-inquiry

What do we understand by inquiry within a Professional Learning Community?

The success of a PLC partly relies on creating a supportive, trusting, unthreatening atmosphere where participants feel safe, among other things, to expose and reflect on vulnerabilities, explore new pedagogical practices, and receive and provide constructive feedback. This may explain that, despite the fact that learning is understood to occur through the exploration of variety and disagreement, PLCs may tend to avoid conflict and the tackling of controversial and sensitive issues and questioning of each other's stated or implicit beliefs. Instead, they may adopt an appearance of consensus and a culture of 'niceness', which prevents the much-needed challenging of ideas among members and the uncovering of their views, theories and reasons to act as they do, which, in turn, enables the awareness that acts as a prerequisite for attitude and behavioural change. In the case of student teachers, the situation may be even more so. Student teachers participating in PLCs (STPLCs) were found to be highly appreciative of their PLC as emotional support during their internship period (Barrios, Sanchidrián, & Carretero, 2021). The possibility of debilitating the affective bonds that tie the members of their STPLC together and upsetting the relationship may lead them (and any PLCs members, in general) to sacrifice the adoption of an inquiry-oriented stance towards their peers in favour of being supportive rather than challenging of one another.

Desire to learn and open-minded stance are two defining characteristics of genuine inquiry. Following Le Fevre et al. (2015), genuine and pseudo-inquiry can be defined in connection with the concept of open-mindedness. Open-mindedness is characterized by authentic openness to learning, willingness to accept alternative possibilities, readiness to examine one's views in the face of new information of evidence, and acceptance that one's beliefs and assumptions may be incomplete, or even misinformed and lacking a sound professional justification (as for instance model 2 thinking). This stance very much rests upon *intellectual humility*, defined as "recognizing that a particular personal belief may be fallible, accompanied by an appropriate attentiveness to limitations in the evidentiary basis of that belief and to one's own limitations in obtaining and evaluating relevant information" (Leary et al., 2017). While pseudo-inquiry may resemble inquiry on the surface, it is not motivated by a truly committed openness to revise one's views and learn. For example, asking questions to others in a PLC meeting does not necessarily indicate a desire to learn from them. In fact, questions are typically used in communication to conceal assertions or requests that the speaker does not want to formulate explicitly, and to disguise one's own viewpoints and interpretations.

Genuine inquiry	Pseudo-inquiry	
	<i>Loaded question</i>	<i>Leading question</i>
You just said that you have involved your students more in the work with developing assessment criteria, can you tell me about how it worked out?	Do you believe that involving students in assessment, which all theory says is important, is not necessary?	Wouldn't the students learned more if they could have been involved in the work with the criteria?
We talked about setting up discussions in small groups in science.	Is it time for discussion assignments in small groups,	Do you really think it is possible to group the

Has anyone tried it? What happened? What have you learned?	when there is so much else that needs to be prioritized?	students so that everyone has someone they feel safe in their group?
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Not only the ‘conflict-avoidance strategy’ may lead to forms of inquiry operating at a superficial level that stick to the uncontroversial. Cognitive biases and limited interpersonal communication skills may also act as barriers to genuine enquiry. Research in the field of psychology shows that people often process and interpret information in ways that confirm their pre-existing assumptions, beliefs and convictions. Confirmation bias creates a false sense of certainty, which, in turn, can minimize the need to inquire and learn from others. A second and related cognitive hurdle to genuine inquiry in conversation is attribution bias, according to which people attribute motives, reactions, intentions and beliefs to others, and assume that they are correct. Genuine inquiry into the accuracy of our attributions is hampered by our conviction that they are correct. Finally, lack of the necessary communication skills to genuinely enquire such as those needed to further explore the other person’s perspective and check one’s interpretation of the other's perspective, additionally hinders engaging in genuine inquiry.

To conclude, while the importance of genuine inquiry for professional development in a PLC is unquestionable, it is essential the recognition of the barriers that prevent it, the different shapes that pseudo-inquiry may take and the required communication skills in order to engage in the inquiry that enables deep-level professional learning.

References

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