



Promoting At-Promise Student Success

How Professional Learning Communities Overcome the Knowing-Doing Gap

The [Promoting At-promise Student Success](#) (PASS) Project is a longitudinal mixed methods research-to-practice partnership with three University of Nebraska (NU) campuses. During the first stage of the project, we identified the concept of Ecological Validation (EV) to explain why and how at-promise students experienced academic and psychosocial success in a comprehensive college transition program. The second stage of the project included developing cross-functional learning communities on each of the campuses to explore how to leverage the concept of EV to create broader institutional change in the hopes of improving outcomes for all at-promise students.

As members of a PLC learn and are ready to act on their knowledge, they sometimes experience a challenge when moving from learning to action. This gap between learning (knowing) and action (doing) has been labeled by researchers as the “*knowing-doing gap*.” There are various ways this gap can be overcome. In this brief, we describe strategies that can be used to help bridge the gap and keep individuals and the larger group moving forward.

In our work with campuses in the NU system, we found two categories of challenges with moving from *knowing* to *doing*. The first category included challenges that were more individual and related to overcoming mental blocks, such as getting caught up imagining barriers to action, gaining only a superficial understanding of core concepts, struggling to envision moving from knowledge to action. The second category featured more group-level challenges, including new people joining the team who needed to get up to speed, or groups understanding one area of EV (e.g., being strengths-oriented and collaborative) but other areas less (e.g., being developmental and holistic).

Despite these challenges, we observed varied ways PLC members overcame the knowing-doing gap, which is a common barrier to integrating a new practice. Just recognizing there can be barriers for people to integrate and act on their new knowledge is an important insight. In this brief, we highlight several strategies that campuses used to bridge the knowing-doing gap and help their teams move toward action.

Reflection Time and Facilitators’ Feedback

Each PLC meeting provided time for reflection and questions. During this time, PLC members often described where they were getting hung up or lost as they tried to enact new concepts. At times, they brought examples of when they had succeeded or faced challenges, which allowed the group to offer feedback as well as learn from the work of others. This reflective time allowed the PLC facilitators to support members as they made sense of these challenges and explore potential next steps.

Experimenting with Implementing New Knowledge in their Own Units Before Undertaking Cross-Functional Work

One of the most common approaches for helping PLC members move from learning to action was to have them brainstorm ways to activate EV in their individual work and within their unit. As PLC members described the potential ways EV could be used in a specific setting they were very familiar with, they came to see how the concept was actionable. Several of the PLC activities engaged PLC members in this type of exploration — having “homework” where they tried out practices in their own units and then came back to describe how things went and get feedback from the group. This process mirrors work in faculty learning communities (FLCs) where faculty try out new teaching techniques in class and then come back to the FLC to review the efficacy of the new practice with the group. By the time they got to the point of engaging the broader campus, each of the PLC members had experience operationalizing the ideas, and the facilitators encouraged the group to consider how these experiences could be leveraged as they thought about engaging with the broader campus.

Explaining EV to Another Person

A common strategy to help PLC members translate their knowledge to action was asking them to teach or explain EV to another person. In explaining EV to others, the PLC members had to really make the concept their own, using their own language and examples. They began by practicing this process with other members of the group — in particular, they developed an “elevator pitch” that explained ecological validation in a concise and accessible way. The group members were then encouraged to share what they learned with colleagues in their units. PLC members explained that teaching or training their colleagues helped them implement the concepts more effectively in their own practice.

Professional Development

PLC members planned professional development for other educators from cross-functional units across campus. Planning professional development was another form of teaching that helped deepen PLC members’ understanding of the concepts. The PLCs at the NU campuses planned campus-wide professional development summits that modeled the idea of the need to work cross-functionally and at the overall institutional level to implement EV. The deeper understanding that PLC members gained through facilitating these events assisted them in activating the concepts in their unit, cross-functional work or work with other subgroups and committees on campus.

Examples from Other Campuses

We worked with three different NU campuses and created opportunities for them to hear what their colleagues on other campuses were doing. The facilitators met several times each year to share strategies for supporting their groups and to get ideas for activities. PLC members met once or twice a year via video meetings to discuss successes and challenges. PLC members consistently noted how the conversations with other campuses helped them envision new strategies as well as share resources with other campuses. Seeing the concepts enacted in another campus context allowed PLC members to brainstorm more openly than when they considered their own context, where they may start by considering constraints. Seeing examples on another campus, where they were not as aware of potential constraints, allowed more creative freethinking. This helped members to envision the work and move to action versus becoming caught up in barriers that might prevent them from acting. The PLCs developed a shared language and trusting relationships across the campuses, which enabled them to have honest conversations and share resources. For example, the campuses consistently shared materials they developed for professional development that could be adapted for the other campus contexts.

Shared Problem Solving and Application

The PLCs relied on interactive activities during meetings to promote collective problem solving. In order to foster this process, they developed vignettes that reflected common issues that students faced and used the vignettes to stimulate dialogue about how to best support a student. In other instances, PLC members brought in institutional data or real situations with identifiable information removed (i.e., an email from a student discussing a challenge navigating campus) to foster discussion about if and how EV concepts could be applied to what was happening on their campus. When the data they needed did not exist, the PLC members developed a process to interview or survey students. Each activity entailed identifying a key issue and then applying what they learned about EV to explore potential solutions. By practicing cross-functional thinking, getting feedback on if they were (mis)understanding EV concepts, and collaborating with each other to apply concepts to real scenarios, they pushed past conceptual understandings. By having to articulate the concepts in their own words and engage in strengths-based problem-solving, they activated the knowledge to solve problems. Often, these activities and discussions led to PLC members subsequently engaging with colleagues across campus to enact the recommendations.

Case Studies

Each PLC's learning activities included case studies (e.g., articles in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, book chapters or webinars) of other campuses implementing culture change or using EV. While the members did not get the opportunity to interact with educators from these campuses, they used the case studies to look for innovative approaches that may be adapted for their campus context. PLC members discussed how case studies, scenarios and other examples of the concepts being activated helped them to better envision and be able to act on the concepts. Therefore, ensuring the PLC curriculum offers sufficient real-life examples from various units and settings helps various PLC members to overcome the knowing-doing gap. For example, having specific cases by different units (alumni affairs, registrar, financial aid) is important so that different groups are able to see the new practices in action.

Tools — Rubrics, Checklists and Action Guides

PLC members created tools to help each other in moving from knowledge to action. EV rubrics for a particular work area or role were one tool that members created for themselves first and then shared with others in a similar role. Checklists for activating a practice through an EV lens were also developed. Action guides were also helpful and they usually conveyed examples of how a particular professional enacted EV, such as a development officer or someone in facilities. Whether it was a rubric, checklist or action guide, these tools that PLC members created helped their own progress in overcoming the knowing-doing gap and assisted others they worked with, as well.

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