

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

How Professional Learning Communities Lead to Improved Student Outcomes

Effective Professional Learning Improves Student Outcomes

Professional learning is an opportunity to improve skills, learn from others' experiences, and reflect on what does and does not work in practice. As professional learners, educators come to new learning experiences with preconceived ideas about what they already know and what they hope to get from a learning experience.

This paper outlines the most effective ways for educators to develop their professional practices and improve student outcomes through professional learning communities (PLCs).

Studies show that approaching professional learning as an ongoing, collaborative process, where educators share their successes, challenges, and strategies for improving teaching practices—followed by other members of the community sharing their ideas and feedback—allows them to expand their knowledge beyond what they get from a one-day training or conference session.

This paper also provides an overview of how virtual PLCs enable educators to engage with others more easily, employing resources that may not be otherwise available. Educators can find social, emotional, and professional support when their virtual PLCs stay connected, no matter where they are geographically. Studies show that PLCs offer the most effective format for ensuring ample time and collaboration to establish and meet clear goals for educators and students.



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What Makes Professional Learning Effective?

Research shows that most forms of professional learning are ineffective when it comes to effecting real change in professional practice (Prenger, Poortman, & Handelzalts, 2019). Traditional professional learning opportunities are often lecture-based, non-collaborative, one-time learning experiences. However, effective professional learning is about more than attending a weeklong conference or passively watching an occasional webinar. It involves deeper thinking and reflection on one's practice.

Professional learning becomes a powerful tool when taken out of its traditional silo and placed in an active community of learners with shared values, goals, and interests.

Figure 1, below, highlights research-based traits of quality professional learning. There are many overlapping characteristics among the lists; terms that are found in multiple studies appear in bold.

CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adaptive • Data-informed • Focused • Individualized • Job-embedded • Mentor-based • Ongoing • Strategic <p>(Zepeda, Parylo, & Bengston, 2014)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborative • Instruction-Focused • Job-Embedded • Ongoing • Supportive <p>(Hunzicher, 2010)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interactive • Problem-Based • Research-Informed • Self-Reflective <p>(Robertson, 2016)</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adaptive • Collaborative • Experimental • Exploratory • Goal-Oriented • Self-Reflective • Supportive <p>(Mills & Harrison, 2020)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interactive • Interest-Based • Flexible • Impactful • Relevant • Self-Reflective <p>(Oddone, Hughes, & Lupton, 2019)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborative • Goal-Oriented • Job-Embedded • Ongoing • Results-Driven <p>(Dufour & Marzano, 2008)</p>

Figure 1

It is essential to consider how to apply these effective professional learning characteristics to the fundamental questions asked by educators before, during, and after instruction: What do we want students to learn? How will we know if they have learned? How will we respond if students do not learn? How will we respond if students already know it? (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010). Professional learning communities provide the structure needed to help educators focus their learning and apply their knowledge to the issues they face in the classroom.

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Going Beyond Simple Professional Learning

When considering how best to support educators as learners, professional learning cannot take a one-size-fits-all approach. An educator puts more than just an instructional method into practice, applying their knowledge and skills, their beliefs about how content should be taught, and their mission as an educator (Valke, 2013).

*In **Student Achievement through Staff Development**, the authors describe three “essential elements of staff development focused on student achievement.” These are:*

1. A professional learning community dedicated to further study, practical applications, and the sharing of results and practices;
2. Content that focuses on “curricular and instructional strategies” most closely tied to students’ achievement and outcomes;
3. Measurable outcomes for students and educators; *and* Professional learning processes that “enable educators to develop the skill to implement what they are learning” (Joyce & Showers, 2002).

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

Professional learning communities go beyond simple professional learning by providing learners with opportunities for continued knowledge and skill development. They take effective professional learning characteristics and apply them specifically to educators’ goals, challenges, classroom experiences, and best practices. Through ongoing reflection and action—both as a team and as individuals—educators continuously give and receive feedback to improve their teaching and student outcomes.

PLCs also give educators the dedicated time and space needed to pause and reflect together in a way that unstructured planning and reflection do not. Taking the time to work together helps educators identify the most critical areas of focus when, at times, it seems the list of challenges is too long to address. Because a PLC is a community, the chances are high that an educator can learn from fellow members facing the same issues or have successfully addressed them.

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What do Educators Want in a Professional Learning Experience?

Research shows that many educators already know that PLCs are a strong professional learning strategy. Educators have reported dissatisfaction with the amount of lesson observation, coaching, and PLC opportunities regularly offered (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2014). This dissatisfaction highlights the limitations of traditional professional learning opportunities and gives great insight into what educators know they want from their PLCs.

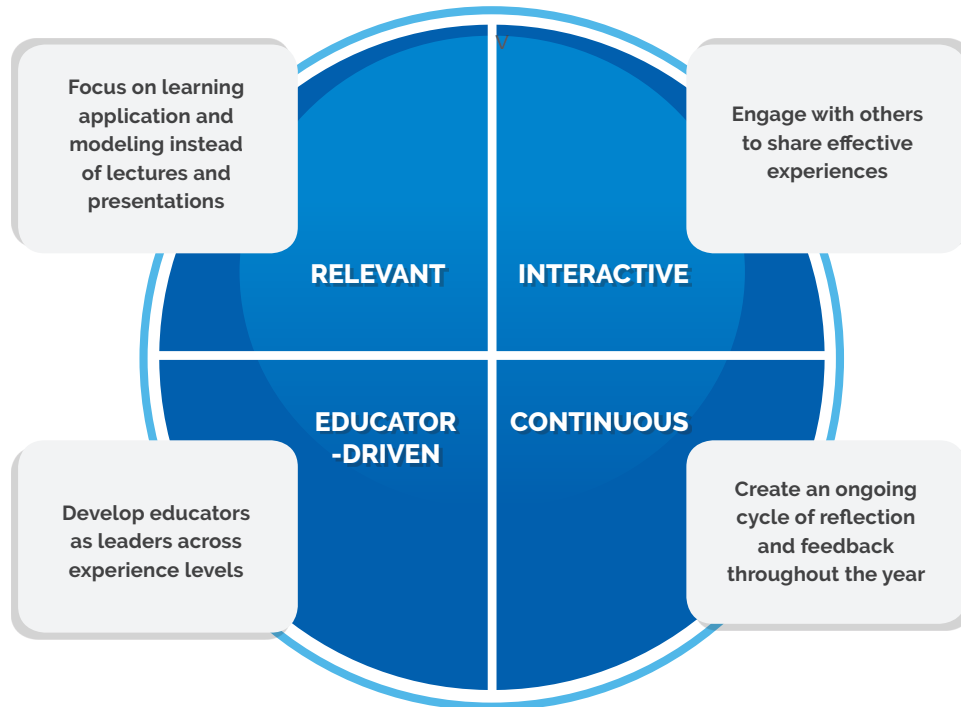


Figure 2: Adapted from The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2014

These educator-determined traits align closely with the characteristics of effective professional learning outlined in Figure 1. PLCs present those much-needed opportunities for relevant, interactive, educator-driven, and continuous professional learning that is almost impossible to replicate in a webinar, conference session, or single face-to-face training.

Traditionally, new instructional strategies are “presented in a generic fashion that educators need to adapt to the particulars of their classrooms, and within their specific subject disciplines” (Mills & Harrison, 2020).

Making the Most of Professional Learning Time

For educators, time is, perhaps, their most limited resource. While efforts should be made to conserve as much of it as possible, making professional learning an ongoing priority throughout the year is essential. By restructuring professional learning as relevant and educator-driven, PLCs make the most of our educators' time.

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PLCs help develop effective leaders.

PLCs not only give educators a chance to share knowledge and to learn from others, they also develop educators as effective school leaders. In a study of educator leadership in US National Blue Ribbon schools, strong educator leadership was found to impact student achievement and achievement gap closing (Visone, 2020). PLCs take professional learning out of the hands of an administrator or facilitator and give educators the power to determine their learning goals and subsequent actions.

By empowering educators to share a leadership role in their learning communities, they determine where their time is best spent (Anderson, 2019). By focusing as a team on specific needs, PLCs can avoid bombarding educators with long lists of resources and instead offer them a space to work together on relevant, specific, and timely issues (Soulen, 2020). Modeling instructional practices has also been shown to be “a key factor in relationship building with [educators]” (Lesley, Beach, & Smit, 2020).

PLCs encourage strong peer relationships.

Strong peer relationships among educators are critical to successful collaboration. “It is rare that meaningful learning occurs when individuals are uncomfortable, which signifies the importance of establishing authentic relationships and a trusting environment” (Bates & Morgan, 2018). When educators have the opportunity to collaborate and build trust over time, their conversations become more meaningful, and they are more open to giving and receiving feedback. This investment in the social-emotional well-being of educators inevitably impacts the social-emotional learning of students. In one study, educators reported that “utilizing the PLC framework is a lived experience that has forged stronger working relationships and facilitated an examination of our [educator] preparation curriculum” (Nenonene, Gallagher, Kelly, & Collopy, 2019).

The shared values and scholarship of a PLC setting give educators opportunities to talk about what they already do that works and how to connect what they know with what needs to be done. Educators across all grades, from early childhood through higher education, benefit from professional learning communities.



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How PLCs Benefit their Expanded Education Community

It is not only educators who benefit from PLCs. They can be a powerful tool to support equity, diversity, and inclusion efforts by educators and administrators. When reflecting on what students need to learn and how to get students to reach those goals, educators can also take a closer look at obstacles faced by various student populations. Educators review areas with gaps in learning related to content and student demographics and collaborate on solutions for closing those gaps. Using classroom evidence, PLCs can discuss specific issues encountered by members of the group, find patterns in teaching and learning deficiencies, and make decisions about reframing content and practice to reach all students. "Teams should always examine the impact their efforts are having on student learning. This involves not only looking at student outcomes but also at changes in teaching" (Fisher, Frey, & Almarode, 2019).

By pooling their collective knowledge, PLCs can more easily identify trends in learning outcomes in different groups of students.

While it may occasionally lead to uncomfortable conversations, the resulting changes may greatly impact instructional changes and student growth. Educators can then support and mentor each other as they learn how to improve equity, diversity, and inclusion initiatives in their classrooms and schools. The mentoring in PLCs has been shown to benefit everyone involved, sometimes in unintended ways. In one study, educators who were viewed as mentors in the PLC experienced "professional growth with respect to their own teaching identity and teaching practice" (Walters, 2020). Additionally, research shows that both new and veteran educators benefit from a collaborative professional learning environment on multiple levels: new educators find mentors, veteran educators learn new approaches to instruction, and both groups engage to tackle ever-changing requirements handed down from administrators and other stakeholders. "By cultivating supportive conditions, the faculty who are engaged will be able to work in an environment that is in a continuous learning cycle that utilizes innovation and experimentation to improve their professional practice" (Nenonene, Gallagher, Kelly, & Collopy, 2019). In a study published in the *Journal of Educational Change*, qualitative data showed that how educators addressed instructional change did not differ between new and experienced educators. (Lockton & Fargason, 2019). When working together, social relationships within the PLC became key to confronting common issues, as educators of all experience levels adapted.

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Virtual PLCs

As virtual and digital educator resources have become more prevalent, so have the benefits of creating virtual professional learning communities. Virtual PLCs can overcome the constraints faced by educators who have limited access to academic, social, professional, and educational resources. “Creating online learning communities for educators is not about adding technology to learning communities; rather, it means creating and supporting a process which is purposeful, flexible, and continuous and develops [educator] content and pedagogical knowledge” (Lock, 2006 in Durr, Hales, & Browning, 2020). Virtual PLCs allow for collaborative activities as educators “explore new instructional practices and transfer those new practices with fidelity into their day-to-day planning and teaching” (Mills & Harrison, 2020). Further, studies have found that educators across generations tend to embrace technology when used as a tool for collaborating and sharing knowledge both in and out of the classroom (Bidian & Evans, 2018).

A research review of case study findings revealed that online professional learning communities gave educators opportunities to “enhance their pedagogical knowledge and practice, develop perceptions of themselves and others

as educators, and contribute to the wider teaching profession and beyond.” Educators considered these professional learning experiences to be “highly personal, with variation depending upon their individual learning purposes and characteristics as a learner” (Oddone, Hughes, & Lupton, 2019). Online PLC resources also help educators feel connected in between planned meetings. An educator can share thoughts and strategies at random times throughout the day or week, and other PLC members can check-in, review others' ideas, and share their own recent practices to create an ongoing, seamless professional learning experience.

What makes virtual PLCs so powerful is their ability to meet educators where they are.

Educators in one school can connect with others around the country, successfully tapping into a wider range of resources and expertise. When one educator attends a local conference, she can share new information with PLC members who cannot travel to attend. This type of collaborative experience addresses the needs of educational communities with limited funding and supports “sustained engagement in collaboration, mentoring, and coaching, as well as institutes, workshops, and seminars” (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner, 2017). No matter where they are, each educator

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brings something unique to their PLC, and a study of virtual PLCs found that “despite professional, geographical, organizational, and cultural challenges, [educators]...benefited from the network-specific characteristics as participants reported that they learned about working methods and processes in other schools” (Prenger, Poortman, & Handelzalts, 2019). Educators can then share new knowledge, skills, and processes within their own schools, further expanding the reach of their professional learning communities PLCs that extend beyond the walls of the school make it easier for educators to pool their collective knowledge and share current research to develop solutions applicable to students across the school district, state, or country. In one study of PLCs, participants found that the collaboration created “an important cycle of lesson creating, discussion, practice, further discussion, and innovation” (D’Ardenne, Barnes, Hightower, Lamason, Mason, Patterson, Stephens, Wilson, Smith, & Erickson, 2013). The professionals in these groups found that PLCs offered the most effective format for ensuring ample time, iterative work, and clear goals for their readers across grade levels. Educators also felt stimulated professionally in ways that had not occurred when they were working solely as individuals to come up with creative ideas and solutions.

A Means for Consistent, Effective Professional Learning

As educators adapt to changes in instructional requirements, assessment standards, technological advancements, and virtual learning, they need consistent and effective professional learning support. Professional learning communities, whether in-person, virtual, or a combination of both, offer educators a place to share their experiences and learn from the experiences of others. PLCs connect educators with similar goals and challenges and provide a space for efficient and effective planning and reflection that has been shown to improve educator performance and student outcomes. When educators are supported in their collaborative professional learning efforts, they can make the most of their limited time and resources to effect real change in their classrooms and communities.

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