GTC
General Teaching Council
for England

NCSL
National College for
School Leadership

Action

A

Professional Learning Communities:
source materials for school leaders and
other leaders of professional learning

Developing your professional learning community

Louise Stoll, Ray Bolam, Agnes McMahon, Sally Thomas, Mike Wallace,
Angela Greenwood and Kate Hawkey

department for
education and skills
creating opportunity, releasing potential, achieving excellence

innovation

eplc

Purpose of the activities

The purpose of these activities is to help you promote your professional learning community's (PLC's) development. We have selected five aspects of PLC development processes to focus on in these activities, although you may want to adapt these activities to work on other aspects (see the resource card *What is a professional learning community? A summary* in the introductory source materials for examples of other aspects). The five are:

1 **Leading and managing the PLC**
  Leadership and management are of critical strategic importance to the success of a PLC.
2 **Making the best use of space**
  Building a PLC involves finding space for people to meet, exchange ideas, collaborate and learn together.
3 **Enhancing professional learning and reflective enquiry**
  Professional learning and reflective enquiry don't just happen. Experiences need to be carefully thought through, planned and supported.
4 **Promoting inclusive membership**
  Developing a PLC requires attention to ensure that all staff feel committed and are actively involved.
5 **Extending your learning community through networks and partnerships**
  PLC development also means finding ways to look beyond what is going on within the PLC and encouraging genuine involvement with community partners and in networks with other schools, early learning settings, centres or colleges.

Using the activities

The activities include a range of tools and questions focusing on each of the five areas. They have been designed so that you can just focus on one aspect during a particular meeting or professional learning session, and can work through the aspects in an order and at a time that suits you. You may find it helpful to keep a note of this on your *Route map* (see introductory source materials).

As with other activities in these materials, you will need to decide who it would be most valuable to involve in each activity, noting this on the *Route map*. Taking *Leading and managing a PLC* as an example, it may be most valuable for senior and middle leaders to start answering the questions on page 6.

You may also want to check out the perceptions of other staff and members of the broader learning community. Reading the stories in *Bringing about change* (Booklet 11) may also help you think about increasing involvement in professional learning communities.

To stimulate your thinking before you do the activities, we have included examples and short stories from the EPLC project schools, illustrating how they tackled the challenges of developing these aspects of their PLCs.

We have provided space for you to record your thoughts on using the activities at the end of this document.

Leading and managing a PLC

Leadership and management are vitally important to a PLC, underpinning all other processes described here. We begin with examples of how headteachers and staff in our project schools promoted their PLC in three ways: developing and spreading a learning vision and focus; building trust and collaboration; and promoting distributed leadership. Following the examples, we pose some questions for you to consider in relation to your own PLC.

Developing and spreading a learning vision and focus

- A nursery head promoting the learning emphasis through daily learning and teaching discussions, and regular discussions of each child's progress.
- Drawing on student voice, using them as researchers, giving them increasing choice, and ensuring they were at the centre of dialogue about learning.

- Reviewing aims in another school, leading to a stronger focus on teaching and learning, assessment for learning and self-evaluation. Teams being encouraged to discuss good practice in meetings, and senior leaders modelling this.

Building trust and collaboration

One primary head responded sensitively to personal and professional issues. A colleague said:

"She's always there whatever the crisis. It could be something quite outside the school but she will do her utmost to help to get you where you want to be… If two people have a problem she'll get them together and say, "Lets sort this out." *Staff are not afraid to come forward and say things like,* "I've made a mistake." *That's when the quality comes through because people feel comfortable. Yes she is the boss and she is the head. But you can also say,* "Can I come in and shut the door and speak off the record?" *and you can."*

Relationships among senior leaders in a secondary school were extremely good, the headteacher maintaining contact by spending a little time with each member every day: *"informal moments really which are almost not intrusive to the day, when actually a lot of work is done".*

In one school, the head operated an open-door policy, encouraging staff to bring along ideas. A teacher commented:

"You're encouraged to take risks and be a bit more creative and to work together and develop and share good practice."

Distributed leadership

A teacher in a residential special school described how:

"We all have input. Today was quite typical when the head asked me for my ideas for the policy paper. He tends to kick off with some ideas and then he puts them out for discussion and he then responds. Everybody has got an input, from the cleaners and kitchen staff to the teachers."

A new head of history brought colleagues together, focusing on: *"collaborative lesson planning and damn good lessons… planning every single lesson to make it really good, in line with the principles of the school"*. Taking a *"softly softly"* approach, he 'sold' collaborative lesson planning as 'less work', and gradually colleagues began doing it informally together most evenings. Early on he observed, looking for responsive colleagues, and used a skills and motivation matrix to get to know staff. He realised one teacher had been undervalued and started using and crediting his ideas. The department head took most responsibility for developing initial plans, but gradually all staff shared responsibility. The department's quality came through in students' results and their comments:

"Everyone learns from history."

"It's really interesting. You learn many different things."

"If we're in history and the teachers don't know something, they would tell you."

"*They learn about you and how you work best. They are always learning about their teaching techniques*".

Learning leaders in another school led action research projects linked to school goals and then took responsibility for sharing results with colleagues.

Questions for reflection and dialogue

In your school, early years setting, centre or college, what percentage of staff (*over 80 per cent; 50-80 per cent; 20-49 per cent; less than 20 per cent; or don't know*) would say that the head and senior leadership team (or head of department) actively promote:

	Write in number	*or circle*
1 A shared learning vision and focus?	per cent	don't know
2 Mutual trust, support and collaboration?	per cent	don't know
3 Shared or distributed leadership?	per cent	don't know

What does this suggest to you about the extent to which leaders seek to develop and sustain your PLC?

Write down the three most significant leadership actions taken recently to create, develop and sustain your PLC in order to promote the learning, health and well-being of all children or young people.

1.

2.

3.

What was it that made them so significant, and how might you apply this learning to future leadership actions that will be taken to create, develop and sustain your PLC?

Making the best use of space to promote PLC

Space can often be allocated for some things, such as formal meetings, but if you look at the way space is organised and used in the school, centre or college, this may also suggest ways in which some reorganisation in the building could facilitate staff sharing and learning.

Creating your ideal staffroom or collaborative learning space

Purpose of this activity

The purpose of this activity is to encourage you to think creatively about using physical space to promote the development of your PLC. We have included some examples from our project schools (see below) to stimulate your thoughts before a task that we hope will be valuable and fun for all members of the PLC. The activity can easily be adapted to look at the way time is used for the same purpose.

Using this activity

Bearing in mind the space available to you in your school, centre or college, design your ideal staffroom or collaborative learning space. Use the recording sheet on the next page to record your ideas. Think about how you would arrange seating and tables, what you would have as wall displays and notices, provision for food and drink, what else would be in the room etc. When you have completed your design, use the questions at the bottom of the recording sheet on the next page to have a conversation with colleages and jointly decide on next steps.

Examples of using space to promote PLC development

- Nursery schools with a large, shared classroom where teachers and nursery support staff worked together with the children. With staff often working in sight of each other, observation was often a matter of course, and picking up new ideas was more likely to occur than in a larger school.
- Removing the classroom doors in a primary school, and making classrooms into subject specialist bases: *"People moved classrooms and took off classroom doors so people talked to each other. They could link with each other and not feel totally isolated."*
- Making use of corridor spaces for shared work areas in a primary school for some classes as well as mini-computer labs for all. The classes in Years 3, 4, 5 and 6 were mixed age, and teaching and support staff in each case were organised as a team with two classrooms and a shared work area for their use.

- Using the staffroom for briefing sessions each morning that include an item sharing new learning.
- Providing free tea and coffee at break times in a secondary school to encourage staff to come to the staffroom and having the head often drop in for a chat.
- Shared workrooms for secondary colleagues in different departments: *"We all share the same office and at many levels we operate as a faculty rather than separate departments. We pool our resources, so we are constantly sitting down informally… there's ideas bouncing around all over the place really. It's very effective for that."*
- Locating all the heads of year's offices close to each other to facilitate discussion of issues about progression.
- A coffee-maker placed near the door of a secondary school maths office acting as an invitation to colleagues from other departments to drop in as they passed by.

Creating your ideal staffroom/collaborative learning space

Draw your ideal staffroom/collaborative learning space here

Questions for reflection and discussion

What changes could be easily made to make your existing staffroom or work space a more ideal location for promoting the development of your PLC? How can you ensure this happens?

Enhancing professional learning and reflective enquiry

Above all, a professional learning community promotes ongoing professional learning and growth of all its members. The underlying purpose of such learning is to promote pupil learning, so when deciding what professional learning and enquiry activities to promote, potential consequences for pupil learning need to be considered.

We came across many different professional learning and enquiry experiences in our project schools. As you read the following examples, we hope you will think about professional learning and reflective enquiry in your PLC. After the examples, there is an activity to help you think about your own professional learning and enquiry. .

Examples from the project schools are:
- A secondary school using both experienced and second-year teachers as mentors for new teachers.
- The whole staff group in a nursery school participating in a behaviour course before working together to develop a behaviour policy.
- Primary school learning support assistants providing in-service training (INSET) for teachers on working with autistic pupils.
- Task groups and learning forums in secondary schools focusing on effective teaching and learning across the curriculum.
- Secondary school staff observing and talking with colleagues in a local primary school.
- A teacher videoing pupils over a year, and colleagues reviewing the videos together to identify pupil needs and progress.
- Two drama teachers videoing their classes and analysing them together using their own adapted version of the school's observation sheet.
- Trios of special school staff reviewing and revising targets for each student every three weeks.
- A secondary school teacher carrying out action research to explore effective tutoring when his school embarked on a major change to its pastoral system.
- Research projects by 'learning leaders', focusing on teaching and learning, and sharing results with colleagues at the school's learning forum.

Pause for thought

How do these compare with professional learning and reflective enquiry in your school, centre or college?
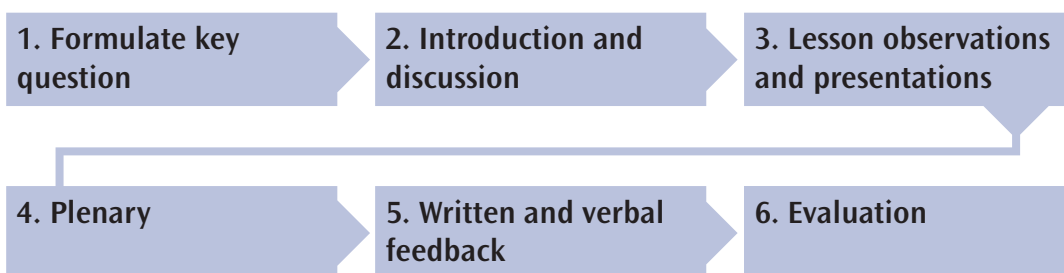
Learning walks

Princeland High School developed a guide for learning walks which was customised at the request of individual staff members. It had six stages.

1 **Formulate a tight question as the focus**. This can be based on school or department plans or a staff training need. The question is essential to maintain focus throughout the walk and keep the process rigorous. An example of a question is: How are we using assessment for learning to motivate pupils and enhance achievement?

2 The first part of the learning walk is an **introduction** to and discussion of the focus.

3 The main body of the learning walk is a series of **lesson observations** and **discussion groups and presentations** that are directly related to the question.

4 The **plenary** allows people to discuss the walk and reflect on points emerging from the walk.

5 **Feedback** is written up in a rigorous format, and can be shared with a variety of people depending on the aim of the learning walk eg with departments, leaders or the co-ordinator of newly qualified teachers.

6 **Evaluation** of the learning walk ensures review and development of the process.

The process is also used in their network.

1. Formulate key question	2. Introduction and discussion	3. Lesson observations and presentations

4. Plenary	5. Written and verbal feedback	6. Evaluation

Example – Question: How do we use ICT to enhance pupil's learning?

Lesson and teacher	Examples of ICT used during the lesson	Evidence that the ICT is enhancing pupils' learning	How is it being assessed (eg peer or teacher assessment)?
Teacher's Name *Year* *Subject*			

Using the activity on enhancing professional learning and reflective enquiry

The next activity is designed for those currently involved in, and others committed to, promoting professional learning. People might work individually to complete the grid on the next page, then either discuss the questions in small groups before sharing and discussing the outcomes as a whole group, or discuss the questions as a whole group. You will probably want to adapt this to suit the size of your group. We have selected seven different professional learning and reflective enquiry strategies as examples for this task, but you may well want to add others[1].

[1] Some helpful resources can be found in DfES, 2005, *Leading and Coordinating CPD in Secondary Schools: Guide for school CPD leaders and school strategy managers*, Nottingham (reference 0188-2005)

Professional learning and reflective enquiry strategies:	When have you or your colleagues used this strategy and for what purpose? (for example, for learning or practising new skills or pedagogies; for acquiring new subject knowledge; for learning more about your pupils' needs; for learning leadership skills or how to operate in a new role; for developing new approaches etc)	What specialist expertise have you drawn on to help identify and build on what staff know and can do already in this area?	What were the benefits of engaging in these experiences (including those for pupils)? [2]	What difficulties were experienced and how were they resolved (or how are they being resolved)?
Coaching and mentoring				
Peer observation and feedback				
Use of web-based materials, videos, DVDs etc				

Professional learning and reflective enquiry strategies:	When have you or your colleagues used this strategy and for what purpose? (for example, for learning or practising new skills or pedagogies; for acquiring new subject knowledge; for learning more about your pupils' needs; for learning leadership skills or how to operate in a new role; for developing new approaches etc)	What specialist expertise have you drawn on to help identify and build on what staff know and can do already in this area?	What were the benefits of engaging in these experiences (including those for pupils)? [2]	What difficulties were experienced and how were they resolved (or how are they being resolved)?
Analysing and using data and evidence				
Collaborative review and discussion of pupils' work				
Action research projects				
Seeking ideas and feedback from pupils or shadowing them				

Once you have completed and discussed the grid, look at your responses and answer the following questions:

Questions for reflection and dialogue

Which strategies appear to be most powerful in helping to deepen professional learning and enquiry and develop staff's practice? Why?

In what ways are you trying to spread and extend the development of these more powerful activities throughout your school, early years setting, centre or college? What else should be done?

What are you doing to ensure that valuable new ideas and strategies become embedded in your practice so that you can draw on them as and when you need them? What else should be done?

Promoting inclusive membership in a PLC

A professional learning community is characterised by commitment and involvement of all staff in the community, not just the teaching staff. Furthermore, people work together across the school, centre or college, not just in groupings of particular subjects, phases or roles. There is a feeling of collective responsibility for the learning and development of all pupils: that everyone has a part to play in this. Equally, all staff are valued for their particular experience and expertise. It isn't easy to develop such inclusive commitment and involvement.

Using the activity on inclusive membership

Here are some examples and stories from project schools of staff working actively to develop more inclusive PLCs. Following the examples and stories, we pose questions for you to consider in relation to your own PLC.

Examples of working towards being an inclusive PLC

- Every teacher and nursery officer having responsibility as key worker for a number of children.
- Every teacher and nursery officer co-ordinating an area of the curriculum.
- A nursery assistant being jointly responsible, with a teacher, for developing early years provision.
- Note-taking at meetings being rotated around all nursery staff.
- With a national switch in governance, the secretary in one nursery going on a bursar's course, and subsequently advising the headteacher on budget issues.
- A secretary receiving tailor-made training in that primary school's cluster, and regularly phoning other secretaries for specific advice.
- A primary learning support assistant running booster sessions for all colleagues in literacy and numeracy.

- Learning support assistants in one primary school attending professional development days, becoming interested in the subject co-ordinator role and then shadowing and working with the teacher co-ordinator.
- Some secondary school learning support assistants acting as mentors to pupils.
- Learning support assistants being attached to curriculum teams in two secondary schools. One regularly planning curriculum and lessons with teachers in one department.
- Three health authority nurses in a special school participating in meetings, joining in school-wide professional development and contributing to training.
- Individual learning targets for students being jointly set by the teacher and special needs assistant in one special school.

During an initiative introducing modern foreign languages for 7-11 year olds at Highdown Primary School, a learning support assistant experienced with younger pupils learnt Spanish and skills to work with older pupils. The teacher leading the initiative helped her:

She's saying, "This is fine" *and I'm saying,* "But should they be doing this or am I expecting too much?" *and she'll say,* "Well this is what we would expect in Year 3".

Reversing roles, the teacher learnt skills for teaching younger children from the learning support assistant when she taught younger pupils for the first time.

Smeatham Secondary School used collaboration sheets, setting out work for the coming weeks and identifying the support staff's role. Teachers and support staff both signed these sheets. Fortnightly team meetings focused on concerns with individual pupils and discussed and evaluated good practice and small innovations by any staff. Attempts were made to place particular learning support assistants with particular teachers where there had been positive experiences and where it was requested.

Teachers at Sildon Special School felt that special needs assistants (SNAs) were key contributors to planning: "They *are a very valuable resource… they make a very real contribution to students' learning. They have insights and experience and knowledge that can be of great benefit… I certainly value them when I plan".* An SNA said, *"I think if anybody walked into the majority of classrooms that I go into and support, they would find it difficult at times to see who was the teacher and who was the SNA because… we work so closely together that I hope that it would be difficult to distinguish."*

Questions for reflection and dialogue

In your school, what percentage of support staff *(over 80 per cent; 50-80 per cent; 20-49 per cent; less than 20 per cent; or don't know)* would say that they:

	Write in number	*or circle*
1 Are valued by teachers?	per cent	don't know
2 Share responsibility for pupil learning?	per cent	don't know
3 Have opportunities for professional development?	per cent	don't know
4 Actively contribute to the school as a PLC?	per cent	don't know

What does this suggest to you about the extent to which your PLC is inclusive?

Write down the three most significant actions you have taken to create a more inclusive PLC?

1.

2.

3.

Why were they important and what can you learn from them for future action?

How can you make your PLC more inclusive to promote the health, well being, achievement and positive life chances of all children and young people?

Extending your learning community through networks and partnerships

A professional learning community is outward looking and develops strong external networks and partnerships. These serve a dual purpose of being able to broaden the learning opportunities for colleagues within schools as well as extending the community of those with a stake in helping improve the learning and life chances of children and young people in schools (see also the think pieces on **Broadening the learning community: Key messages** in Booklet 4).

How can you use this activity?

This activity will help you think about the nature and effectiveness of your current networks and partnerships and how you might strengthen them. First, consider who needs to be involved in this activity to help promote a more extended learning community.

To stimulate your thinking, read the bulleted examples and short stories of networking and partnerships in our project schools. As you read, reflect on the following questions about your own networks and partnerships. There are sheets at the end of the examples for you to record your thoughts and notes of your dialogue. We have also outlined a force-field analysis process to help you deal with challenges you encounter as you work to extend your community (see pages 20-21).

Examples of networking and partnerships

- A small primary school linking with neighbouring schools, enabling staff to observe other teachers working with children of the same age.
- Primary school classroom assistants shadowing colleagues at the local special school and working with them to consider their work with pupils.
- Shared sixth form conferences between a predominantly Muslim secondary school and a largely white independent school being used to widen cultural experience.
- A link between a secondary and a special school resulting in a shared French trip involving gifted and talented pupils and pupils with particular learning difficulties.
- A primary school using funding from the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund for a part-time parent partnership worker to support parents in their own learning.
- Regular meetings taking place between year group heads and a group of social workers.
- A school working with local community representatives to get funding for a state-of-the-art soccer pitch, to be jointly managed by the school and the community.

Smeatham Secondary School was a member of a collegiate of six schools which shared expertise and resources. Activities generated included: regular meetings for heads of core subjects; joint in-service training; and opportunities for students to study a subject at a different school if it was not offered in their own school. A common set of aims and a joint mission statement were agreed, and partner schools were working to establish a graduate teacher training programme.

Rockside Nursery changed considerably with the addition of a family support unit, almost doubling in size. Several new staff came to work in the family unit but their previous jobs had been in childcare with social services rather than education. To bring the two groups together and build the new staff team, initiatives were set in place: setting up a shared staffroom; nursery and family unit staff swapping roles for a day; joint in-service days looking at what worked, what needed improving, and planning these improvements; and a joint weekly staff curriculum meeting using a locally developed self-evaluation framework. In these joint meetings they focused on *"teaching and learning – on what is important in our minds in terms of children's learning"*. They discovered they shared a great deal in common about how to promote children's learning.

External links were a key feature in Winspery Special Nursery. They had developed outreach activities, Saturday and summer play schemes, training for pre-school and primary school staff, and closer working with parents. Children were referred through health visitors and there was liaison with other nursery and primary schools. They led on many initiatives through Beacon School status, worked with groups experiencing difficulties, and provided varied training for other schools, as well as advice for local authority psychologists. The head was involved in many activities and local, national and European networks. She encouraged others to do similarly, and some staff worked part time for the nursery and part time for the local authority.

Questions for reflection and dialogue

How might you adapt or use any of the examples to support and develop your own networks and partnerships?

Think of all of your networks and partnerships. Which are your most effective ones and why?

How do you ensure that good new ideas and strategies you learn through networks and partnerships are shared with colleagues and built into your practice?

Resolving challenges to broaden your learning community

Broadening a learning community is inevitably beset by challenges. Using a force-field analysis may help you with this[3]. This is a technique for analysing and solving complex problems and can be helpful when you want to change a situation, for example to initiate or develop a learning network, to make best use of one in your own setting, or to develop a common language with community partners. The eight steps are fairly self-explanatory:

Using a force-field analysis

Step 1: Identify the main problem, as you see it, about initiating, developing or sustaining a broader learning community and describe it briefly in writing.

Step 2: Analyse it in terms of (a) the present situation and (b) the situation you want to move towards.

Step 3: Make a list of the resisting and driving forces. These can be related to people, money, time, external factors etc – anything that can help or hinder the move towards a broader learning community.

Driving forces promoting change ⟶ ⟵ **Restraining forces resisting change**

[3] Lewin, K, 1947, Frontiers in group dynamics, *Human Relations*, 1 (1), 5-41

Step 4: Underline those forces that seem to be the most important.

Step 5: For each resisting force underlined, list the actions you could take that could reduce or eliminate that force.

Step 6: For each driving force underlined, list the actions you could take that could increase or strengthen that force.

Step 7: Determine the most promising actions towards initiating, developing or sustaining the broader learning community and identify the resources available to help you.

Step 8: Re-examine your actions and put them in sequence, leaving out any that do not fit your overall goals.

Notes

Leading and managing a PLC

Making the best use of space

Enhancing professional learning and reflective enquiry

Use this space to record your thoughts and ideas about using these activities.

Notes

Promoting inclusive membership

Extending your learning community through networks and partnerships

Use this space to record your thoughts and ideas about using these activities.

Action

Developing your professional learning community
Bringing about change: Starting out, developing and sustaining