

The construction of a professional learning community (PLC) for English teachers' development under the Rural Revitalisation Strategy: Summary of recommendations for developing professional learning communities (PLC)

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Supported by



University of Warwick
2023



Based on our experience of setting up a professional learning community in Yunnan Province, we offer the following recommendations, organised according to 12 key themes that emerged from the data.

1. Clarifying the purpose and operation of PLCs to all stakeholders

There was a lack of clarity over the nature and purpose of a PLC, and in particular how it serves as more than merely a forum for presenters to offer solutions to pedagogical problems commonly experienced by teachers.

Recommendations:

- Provide training and resources to all stakeholders to help them better understand what a PLC is, its purpose and value, and the various ways in which it can function so as to best serve the interests and developmental needs of its membership (Lamb 1995). This could include offering workshops, webinars, and online resources.
- Ensure that the PLC has a defined structure, with officers and a defined leadership – possibly expert teachers – who have a deeper understanding of the concept and who can lead on its establishment and development. These individuals can serve as mentors, coaches, and trainers, providing guidance and support as required.
- Establish effective channels of communication to ensure that members remain engaged and are kept fully informed of activities within the PLC. Such channels will likely include email, newsletters, social media, and a PLC website (see below).

2. Achieving a balance between theory and practice

There is clear evidence that teachers do not always understand theory or appreciate its relevance to their practice and the fact that the latter needs to be informed by the former even if a degree of adaptation needs to occur. An improved understanding of this relationship will not only help ensure that teachers are better practitioners but also help them to accept as relevant and worthwhile professional development events run under the auspices of a PLC and which for many represent an intrusion on their limited time.

Recommendations:

- Ensure that the content/topic focus of professional development activities not only reflects current trends and thinking but also directly relates to the needs of the teacher – a relationship that may need to be demonstrated.
- Ensure that the delivery of professional development events considers and elicits participants' reflections on the ways in which ideas may be governed by the constraints and affordances of the context of their application.
- Incorporate practical tasks and experiences that allow teachers to apply theoretical concepts to their real-world teaching situations. This could be done through group projects, peer mentoring and collaborative problem-solving activities that promote reflection and help teachers to understand the diversity of teaching across a range of settings and consider issues around adaptation.
- Encourage teachers to become more reflective in their practice and embrace the theoretical concepts they are learning (Richards & Farrell, 2005). This can be done through the PLC meetings, group discussions and peer dialogue, whether face-to-face or virtually.

3. Modulating the frequency of professional development events

A strong theme to emerge from the data was a sense of teachers being time poor, something which appeared to demotivate and discourage many of them from participating in professional development. Many felt reluctant to engage in professional development very often, if at all. Responses ranged from monthly to every 3 years, and even in the video clips there was some evidence of a number of teachers looking somewhat tired and disengaged, likely due in part to the workshops being scheduled at the end of their working day.

Recommendations:

- Depending on the availability and resources of the school or district, begin by offering professional development events on a quarterly or biannual basis, with additional optional/occasional opportunities throughout the year. Also, larger, costlier, and more formal face-to-face events could be less frequent and interspersed with smaller, less costly, less formal but more frequent online events (Borg, 2015).
- Offer flexible scheduling that takes into account teachers' other professional and personal commitments. Surveying teachers will help schedule events at times that would be most convenient whilst also getting teachers invested in the process.
- Creating a Calendar of Events for the semester or year would also help teachers to plan and make time for their Professional Development sessions.
- Using a variety of formats – careful planning would allow for professional development events to be made available in several formats and give teachers flexibility in the way that best suits schedules and learning styles.
- Providing incentives, where possible, may help to encourage participation. This could include professional development credits, or simply a certificate for attending a certain number of professional development events.

4. The focus of professional development events

Teachers' responses highlighted the importance placed by many on addressing and resolving their everyday practical problems, learning about new theory, and developing understanding of existing theory, career development, and building research capacity, in particular action research.

Recommendations:

- Conduct localised needs assessments to identify the practical problems and needs of teachers in their specific teaching contexts. This will inform the focus of the training events. Our data offers a good steer in this respect.
- Offer training on the nature of action research, research methodology, and the reporting of research for the purposes of presentation and publication (Writing for publication).
- Create opportunities to discuss career paths, opportunities and trajectories, and strategies such as networking and creating and nurturing collaborative activities. Collaboration within and across schools, for example on an action research project, could form the basis for a publication. Such collaboration not only promises to motivate and help teachers overcome workload/time obstacles but also to improve their promotion prospects.
- Use the PLC as a forum for discussing ways of managing the issue of work-life balance, which emerged from the data as a key concern of teachers.

5. Size of professional development events

Respondents indicated that the size of any professional development event will be determined largely by the purpose of the event, but also by the mode of delivery (face-to-face or online – see point 6).

Recommendations:

- If the purpose of an event is primarily transmissive – for example, to provide an overview of a new theory or teaching strategy or resource, a larger group may be particularly appropriate – although this would certainly not preclude smaller group interactions. D
- Even in in large events with a ‘key’ speaker, there need ideally to be opportunities for discussion and small-group interactions and consideration of implications for teachers’ own circumstances, aspirations etc. This will help motivate, encourage future participation and create a sense of community and a shared culture with shared challenges and goals.

6. Modes – online and/or face-to-face

Unsurprisingly, most participants showed a preference for a combination of face-to-face and online professional development events. Teachers’ responses showed recognition of the benefits and drawbacks of both modes of delivery, while presenters felt quite strongly that, in both cases, it is important to consider teachers’ workloads and availability. Questions also arise as to how best to maximise engagement regardless of mode, given teachers’ proficiency levels and insecurities around their understanding of theory.

Recommendations:

- Consider using a blended approach that incorporates both online and face-to-face models of delivery. This provides greatest flexibility and allows teachers to choose the format that works best for them in their local contexts and according to their schedules.
- If it is decided that events are relatively frequent, consider running the same event twice at difference times and/or in different modes to suit different schedules and therefore maximise the ‘reach’ of professional development initiatives
- Ensure that content is relevant and accessible by using infographics/visual aids etc, taking into account teachers’ proficiency levels and insecurities around their understanding of theory.
- Do not prohibit the use of the spoken Chinese and consider providing materials in the L1 as well as in English, and support workshops (where possible).
- Offer training in the use of any online tools, including workshops on using the relevant online platform, or short tutorials on specific tools in order to help teachers to feel more confident. Also, provide technical support during events.

7. Promoting relationships and building a collaborative culture in and between schools

As discussed above, the idea of cross-school collaboration was generally received with a sense of caution, possibly due to a sense of competitiveness and/or a lack of confidence. It may also have been a result of the concern teachers universally felt about the time commitment involved. Despite reservations, participants recognised the value of building a collaborative culture but emphasised that this should be done in the spirit of openness and sharing. Given the geographic challenges of schools located remotely, technology is a key tool to facilitate communication and collaboration between teachers in these schools.

Recommendations:

- Where possible (and feasible) initiatives and/or partnerships that include joint research projects, shared lesson planning, or cross school teaching.
- Opportunities for teachers to observe each other’s classes (may already be happening), sharing teaching materials and undertaking peer to peer feedback.

- Have schools jointly organize professional development events, perhaps by ensuring that PLC organising committees have cross-school membership. Also ensure that other PLC offices have such cross-school membership.
- Use video conferencing, online forums, and shared document platforms (Padlet), as well as social media tools (WeChat) to support cross school projects, joint events, the sharing of resources and the fostering a culture of collaboration.
- Whether online or in person, incorporate group work activities – and particularly teachers working in mixed groups with peers from other schools in the PLC – to encourage teachers to ice break, build teams and network with each other. This will, in turn, help encourage teachers to connect and collaborate after events.
- Celebrate within and across the PLC the successes of individual teachers and schools, share success stories and achievements, and hold celebrations such as award ceremonies to recognize hard work and commitment.

8. Communication platforms for online or blended events.

A number of factors need to be considered in deciding on choice of platform(s).

Recommendations:

- The platform needs to be accessible to all teachers, regardless of their location, device, or technical proficiency.
- Platforms need to enable interaction and collaboration between teachers (e.g. video conferencing, chat rooms, shared document platforms).
- Platforms need to be secure and protect the privacy of participants, especially when dealing with sensitive information.
- Platforms need to be cost-effective and fit within the budget of the PLC.
- Platforms need to come with technical support or easily be troubleshooted by technical experts either within the school, or the professional development community, to ensure smooth and successful delivery of online events.

9. Workshop preparatory work

In order to make events most productive, both teacher participants and presenters highlighted the value of pre-workshop tasks and other preparatory activities in helping participants prepare for the training sessions.

Recommendations:

- Provide pre-event materials where appropriate, such as readings, slides, videos, and discussion prompts to help teachers prepare for their professional development event. This will ensure that all participants are on the same page and both ready and more willing to engage with the content and with their fellow professionals.
- Use interactive apps such as Padlet, Mentimeter, or Kahoot (or equivalents that are easily accessible and available in China) to engage teachers before and during the event. These apps can be used to create polls, quizzes, and interactive discussion boards that help to stimulate engagement and participation.
- Assign pre-event tasks that are manageable, given concerns expressed by teacher participants, and to some extent presenters, over workloads.
- Encourage collaboration prior to PLC events by creating online discussion forums or group chat rooms (see website point, below). This can help to build a sense of community among teachers and facilitate the sharing of ideas and resources; the latter was particularly highlighted by respondents.

10. Feedback on PLCs

According to the workshop presenters, participant feedback on professional development events is vital to the success and continuity of the PLC – a view we wholeheartedly endorse. Feedback ensures that the PLC remains responsive to the needs of the teachers and in doing so reinforces its relevance and value. Monitoring and evaluation of the progress of the PLC helps ensure that its goals are being met and expected outcomes achieved, and by doing so helps identify and respond to areas in need of improvement.

Recommendations:

- After each professional development event, feedback from participants should be sought on the content, delivery, relevance, and effectiveness of the event. This will clearly identify areas for improvement and ensure that future events are better tailored to the needs of the teachers. Feedback can be obtained at the end of face-to-face events either in person prior to their departure or subsequently online.
- Conduct surveys at set points in the teaching year to gather feedback on overall levels of satisfaction with the PLC and professional development events, along with recommendations for improvements, future activities, professional development themes etc. Feedback should also solicit feedback on the emerging collaborative culture and on whether, how and to what extent professional development participants have integrated new learning into their practice. will help to ensure that the PLC remains responsive to the needs of the teachers and can address issues as they arise.
- Consider sharing feedback with teachers on their participation in the PLC and their engagement with the professional development events. This can help to encourage ongoing participation and foster a culture of continuous learning and improvement.

11. What should a PLC website look like and what functions should it fulfil?

Participants all agreed that a dedicated website would be a useful vehicle for the development, effectiveness and sustainability of a PLC, serving in part as a ‘shopfront’ but also potentially fulfilling multiple functions.

Recommendations:

- The website should include information about the purpose, goals, objectives, and modus operandi of the PLC, as well as information – including contact information – about its members and officers, and how to join or become a member of the PLC.
- There should be included a calendar or schedule of professional development events, including information about the topic, location, and time of each event, along with an event sign up page
- The website should be easy to navigate so that users can easily find the information they are looking for.
- There should be access to resources relevant to the nature and purpose and objectives of the PLC, to upcoming professional development events, and, more broadly, to teachers’ own teaching contexts and circumstances. These resources could include articles, videos, and other materials that support professional learning and development, and which should extend beyond classroom teaching resources.
- The website should include tools that foster communication and collaboration between schools and individual teachers, and including discussion forums, chat rooms, and shared document platforms.

- News and updates relating to the PLC should feature, including announcements about new professional development events, changes to the schedule, and updates on the progress of the PLC.
- The website should provide a facility through which members of the PLC can provide feedback on its general functioning, events attended etc, along with recommendations (see feedback, above).

11. How to foster leadership of PLCs

Leadership of PLCs can be promoted by ensuring, from the outset, a clear leadership structure that is accessible to all those involved, either in delivery or participation. Its leaders should be proactive in fostering a culture of collaboration both within the PLC and particularly across schools by:

Recommendations:

- Training should be made available, if only initially and for expert teachers who are engaged and enthusiastic about the idea of a PLC, around leadership, the qualities of leaders and how to grow organisations.
- Holders of any offices within the PLC should be replaced periodically in order to give others leadership experience and help them feel invested in the PLC initiative. It may be that such individuals, prior to assuming any such role, would need to have completed the above-mentioned leadership training.
- Leaders should consistently encourage collaboration and shared leadership within the PLC by identifying opportunities for members to work together on projects/initiatives. Empowering members of the PLC at all levels will help to build a sense of community and shared ownership of research and practice.
- Leaders should also recognize and celebrate leadership: highlighting achievements, recognizing, and sharing successes builds a culture of leadership. Encouraging members to propose and organize their own events or initiatives, and providing timely support and resources can only serve to build a culture of creativity and continuous improvement.

