

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

# User guide: getting started and thinking about your journey

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# Why are professional learning communities important?

Professional learning communities make a difference. In short, being an active participant in a professional learning community helps people make the most of all the different initiatives in which they are involved. Most important, professional learning communities make a difference to pupils' learning and engagement because:

*An effective professional learning community has the capacity to promote and sustain the learning of all professionals in the school community with the collective purpose of enhancing pupil learning<sup>1</sup>.*

The notion of professional learning communities (PLCs) has really taken off around the world. Researchers have focused attention on the topic for some time, especially in North America<sup>2</sup>, but there's a growing realisation that professional learning communities hold considerable promise for supporting implementation of improvement initiatives and the progress of educational reform more generally. Schools need to be able to respond to challenges posed by changes in society (eg in family structures, life expectancy, attitudes to religion and community etc), technology, the environment, work patterns (eg no more job for life etc), the economy, and politics. Added to this, the knowledge base is growing very fast – take the new sciences for example – and we know so much more about learning than we used to. Young people are also maturing faster. Automatic respect for teachers is no longer guaranteed – it has to be earned<sup>3</sup>. It is vital that pupils' individual learning and development needs can be met, to ensure their well-being, academic progress and achievement. With so many challenges in a fast-changing and increasingly complex world, continuous and sustainable learning by everyone in the school community becomes an imperative.

*In a fast-changing world, if you can't learn, unlearn and relearn, you're lost<sup>4</sup>.*

It has been known for a long time that professional development is important for teachers but it has become increasingly clear that sending individuals on one-shot workshops has very little impact either on their practice or on bringing about more positive change throughout their schools. The school workplace as a site for teacher learning has been shown to offer much greater opportunity for development<sup>5</sup>, and a concentrated effort on promoting a range of continuing professional development (CPD) experiences is much more likely to have a positive impact. The challenges of change are also too great for individuals to shut themselves away behind closed classroom

doors and try to resolve them alone. This means that a concerted, collaborative effort is necessary, including collaborative professional development<sup>6</sup>.

Support staff also have an important role to play in helping to enhance pupils' learning and promote school improvement, and their development and involvement as key members of the school's learning community is essential<sup>7</sup>.

*As if community were not ambitious enough, a community of learners is ever so much more. Such a school is a community whose defining, underlying culture is one of learning. The condition for membership in the community is that one learn, continue to learn and support the learning of others. Everyone<sup>8</sup>.*

Looking outwards is part of this. It is increasingly important to be open to ideas from elsewhere, drawing on skills and experiences of colleagues in other schools nationally<sup>9</sup> and internationally<sup>10</sup>, as well as a wide range of community partners<sup>11</sup> who have a vital stake in helping improve pupils' life chances. Reaching out beyond one's own school not only has the potential to enhance learning 'back at the ranch' but also exemplifies the kind of system leadership whereby all those involved in the education of children and young people feel a collective sense of responsibility to ensure that all pupils can progress and achieve<sup>12</sup>, and that one school's improvement is not at the expense of other local schools<sup>13</sup>.

The rationale for promoting professional learning communities is that when teachers and other colleagues work and learn collaboratively with a clear focus on learning – of pupils and of themselves – schools' and, ultimately, the system's overall capacity is built, helping to raise standards and promote a broader range of outcomes, as well as generating and supporting sustainable improvements. Essentially, whatever else you are focusing on – whether it's introducing thinking skills or assessment for learning across the curriculum, trying to improve the literacy of a particular group of pupils etc – you need to be working on developing your professional learning community in parallel and in relation to these efforts, to help embed them into your working practices.

We carried out a two-and-a-half year research project in England<sup>14</sup> from 2002 to 2004, exploring what characterises professional learning communities, the processes involved in creating, developing and sustaining them, and what helps and hinders these processes<sup>15</sup>. While PLCs have been promoted as a good idea, it was the first project in England that took a detailed look at the process of creating and developing PLCs, as well as whether and how they make a difference.



We began this user guide with our project definition of an effective professional learning community and the impact it can have. A professional learning community really can make a positive difference to the learning and morale of staff. More fundamentally, it can make a positive difference to the learning and engagement of pupils. When we talk about pupil learning, we mean learning in the widest sense, which includes many outcomes, including well-being. This use of the word 'learning' is similar to the way it was characterised in a UNESCO report: learning *to know*, learning *to do*, learning *to live together*, and learning *to be*<sup>16</sup>. Reflecting on our research's findings, we believe that the positive difference is probably achieved because:

*A professional learning community is an inclusive group of people, motivated by a shared learning vision, who support and work with each other, finding ways, inside and outside their immediate community, to enquire on their practice and together learn new and better approaches that will enhance all pupils' learning.*

## Why source materials and what are they for?

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We were asked to identify practical lessons that would be helpful for anyone trying to develop or help others develop a PLC. These source materials are part of a wider strategy to support others in making use of our findings. Colleagues in our case study schools and the headteacher and teacher researchers on our team told us that materials and tools that they could use would be of most value.

We are using the word ‘source’ in two senses. The first is that a research project – *Creating and Sustaining Effective Professional Learning Communities* – was our source for all of the activities. The second is that we hope they will be a source to stimulate your thinking and action in relation to PLCs. With an increased focus on intelligent accountability<sup>17</sup> and school self-evaluation internationally<sup>18</sup>, including its use in many national, provincial and state accountability systems, we believe that analysing the process, progress and impact of PLCs offers a valuable addition to many of the existing measures used.

These are not, however, just analysis materials. We hope you will treat them as a set of practical source materials to help promote the whole development cycle within your own context. We have designed the contents in the spirit of promoting collaborative reflective enquiry, a key characteristic of PLCs, amongst you and your colleagues. In doing this, we draw on our project’s findings and methodology, as well as on other relevant research and dissemination experience.

Our aim in these source materials is to help:

- promote understanding of, and engagement with the idea and practice of PLCs with particular reference to people’s own contexts
- stimulate PLCs by promoting self-evaluation, reflective enquiry, dialogue, collaborative learning and problem-solving

In other words, our intention is to provide practical support for those wishing to develop and sustain themselves as effective PLCs, using an enquiry-oriented approach, in line with our definition of a professional learning community.

There are other materials and approaches available to support schools in their efforts to promote professional learning and enhance workforce development and organisational change. Our materials are intended to complement such approaches. While our materials are primarily based on the experiences of one project, we used international research findings as a starting point and have come up with many similar findings. Also, the educational big picture moves fast, so we have drawn upon other initiatives and literature to help you make links.

## Who are the source materials for?

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The source materials are primarily for school leaders and other leaders of professional learning interested in developing their school, early years setting, department or faculty as a PLC, and for those working with them. We hope they will be useful for heads, members of senior leadership teams, co-ordinators of continuing professional development, middle leaders and leaders of support staff. In addition, we see them being used to help build leadership capacity amongst all staff.

We have worded the materials as though they will be self-facilitated by colleagues in schools, but they are also designed for external critical friends – advisers, consultants and trainers – who wish to support school colleagues in developing a PLC.

We think there may also be wider audiences for these source materials. These include leaders working beyond their schools to promote system-wide change. We think that many of the ideas will also be useful for those involved in networking and partnership relationships, given that successful collaboration beyond schools is characterised by many of the same features as PLCs within schools<sup>19</sup>. In addition, our trials of the ideas with colleagues in colleges, local authorities or school districts and governing bodies or school councils have demonstrated that they find the ideas valuable in helping them think about schools they know well and their relationship with schools. Furthermore, they find they can apply the ideas to their own organisation, group and relationships. We hope you might also find these valuable. If we haven't always used your language to describe your organisation, we hope you will translate for your own context.

## Where should you start?

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How you proceed next is up to you and will depend on the particular circumstances in your school, schools or setting, although we anticipate that you will be thinking about how this fits within your overall development plans. To get the most out of the activities, we suggest that one or two people read through the resource materials as a whole to help you think through the possibilities for using and timetabling the individual activities.

We have included a number of different activities grouped under five headings:

- 1 **familiarisation and deepening understanding**
- 2 **audit**
- 3 **planning**
- 4 **action**
- 5 **monitoring and evaluation**

There are no assumptions about sequence; for example, we know that it's always important to be thinking about what you want to evaluate when you are planning. We do believe, however, that it is important that you take the time first to familiarise yourselves with the underlying ideas of what professional learning communities are, the impact they can have, what characterises them, the processes that help to create and develop them, and factors that help and hinder these processes. You will find this in the think piece in booklet 2 on *Creating and sustaining an effective professional learning community*, which you could:

- introduce as a whole reading with questions (as we have it in the materials)
- break up into shorter readings for different groups to read and share with each other in a co-operative group learning jigsaw process (see the thinkpiece on *Broadening the learning community: key messages* in booklet 4 for guidelines on how to use this process)

- become familiar with and then introduce it using the two-sided *What is a professional learning community? A summary* card as a prompt sheet which can also be copied for colleagues (see the **Resources** accompanying this section of the source materials)

A set of supporting PowerPoint slides is also available on the websites listed on the back of these materials.

The activity on *Exploring the idea of professional learning communities* in booklet 5 will also help people become more familiar with what PLCs are and their potential. We do think you'll get more out of the rest of the activities if you take the time to focus on familiarising people with what the term 'professional learning community' means.

After this, you and your colleagues will obviously be in the best position to decide in which order to tackle the activities and which ones to leave out, which is why they are intended as pick-and-mix activities. Some are deliberately similar to each other because it is important that you choose the activities and presentation mode best suited to your personal circumstances and style; for example, we have included activities including photos, drawings and mind maps as well as surveys, stories and questions.

Each of the 12 activities or sets of activities is introduced with information about its purpose and how it or they might be used. Sometimes, a range of options for using the activities is also provided. You will find further details on the activities on the *Contents guide* card (see the **Resources** accompanying this section of the source materials).

## Who should be involved?

For each activity, you will want to think about who would be the most appropriate people to involve. Certain activities may best suit the whole staff, while others would be better for senior leaders, middle leaders, or departments or groups. You may want to use some with pupils or students, parents, school governors or council members, or community partners, or adapt them for use with these groups. The goal, of course, is developing learning communities.

## A route map

To help guide you on your journey, we suggest that you create an evolving route map of activities that you use, recording who is involved, when they are used, and which activities you think you want to use next and why. Probably, you'll want to use at least one of the activities within each of the five sections. We make a few suggestions in the activities about others that might be good next steps, but the decision is, of course, yours. We have included a **Route map** template for you to complete (see the **Resources** accompanying this section of the source materials).



## Building PLC development into overall development plans

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To keep the idea of professional learning communities alive, we hope that you are able to incorporate these ideas into your overall development plans and professional learning time on a regular basis. It's important to remember that developing a professional learning community isn't an add-on; it's a way to help you accomplish your goals and initiatives.

We make only a few suggestions about specific timing of activities because we know that you will want to adapt these to your own circumstances. The source materials, as a whole, could provide the content for several professional development days, but most of the activities needn't take too much time and could be used in a staff or other meeting or learning forum.

## Resources

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In addition to the activity booklets, we have included three resources which you will find in this section of the source materials.

- 1 A **Contents guide**, which provides a handy guide to the different activities and their purposes.
- 2 A **Route map**, with a blank template for you to map out your journey as you use these materials.

- 3 **What is a professional learning community? A summary**, which summarises the characteristics, processes and impact of PLCs, as found in our project. It will be useful as a resource for the other activities to remind colleagues of where each activity fits within the overall picture and to provide some detail about the characteristics and processes.

## In conclusion

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We hope you find these to be valuable and stimulating resources, and enjoy using them. In the spirit of professional learning communities, we would be interested to hear how you are using or applying the ideas. You can contact us via [www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/innovation-unit](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/innovation-unit)

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Contents guide

What is a professional learning community? A summary

Route map

**National College for  
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