Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are increasingly recognised as a major lever teachers and schools can utilise in improving student outcomes. PLCs have been found to contribute to instructional improvement of teachers,[1] increase the sense of collective responsibility throughout the school,[2] improve teacher motivation and work satisfaction[3], and improve student motivation and performance.[4]

PLCs are also strongly aligned to international evidence on what constitutes effective professional learning. They are collaborative by nature, engaging teachers in real practice-related content over an extended period of time with a focus on how to better support student learning.[5] When approached in a considered manner, PLC priorities are based on data and evidence. They involve a rigorous approach to monitoring the impact of any new initiatives, so as to demonstrate actual improvements in teaching practice and student outcomes.

What is a PLC?

PLCs most commonly describe groups of teachers and other faculty "sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented and growth promoting way."[6] There is no hard and fast rule as to what constitutes a PLC as they can be entirely contextual; schools may also refer to these groups as professional learning teams or networks.

In terms of their scope, PLCs may operate within a single school with groups of teachers who teach the same year level, and/or subject area. They may also operate on an 'opt-in' basis, whereby teachers elect to join a PLC focusing on a specific area of teaching practice improvement.

PLCs may also operate across groups of schools – schools that are aligned by virtue of geography (e.g. regional clusters of primary schools), student cohort (e.g. age range or subject orientation), or admission type (e.g. selective schools). These across-school groups are often labelled in relevant literature as 'networked learning communities' but they broadly function in the same way as traditional PLCs within a school.[7]

The features of effective PLCs

International literature on PLCs lists the following key attributes of effective PLCs:

1. **Shared values and vision** – Each PLC needs to be driven by an 'undeviating focus on student learning.'[8] It is important that participating teachers share a belief that it is their role to help all students reach their full potential and that through working together they are more likely to achieve this aim. This includes commitment to the active collection and sharing of relevant data so the PLC can identify shared and individual teaching strengths and

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[1] Andrews and Lewis (2007)
[2] Louis and Kruse(1995)
[3] Louis and Kruse (1995); Cordingley et al (2003)
[4] Cordingley et al (2003)
[5] Timperley et al (2007); Yoon et al (2007); Blank & de las Alas (2009)
[6] Stoll et al (2006), Mitchell and Sackney 2000; Tool and Louis 2002
[7] Toole and Louis (2002); Hargreaves and Giles (2003)
[8] Louis and Kruse (1995)

development needs.

2. **Collective responsibility and collaboration** – As part of their shared values, teachers should feel a collective responsibility for the learning of all students. This way when a staff member brings an issue relating to one of their students, it immediately becomes the group's issue and the responsibility of all members to help find a solution. This needs to occur in a high-trust context, without any judgement on the teacher raising the issue.[9] Effective PLCs encourage and share research into new pedagogical practices, seek external expertise when necessary and cultivate a culture whereby teachers are open and receptive to giving and receiving feedback from one another.

3. **Reflective professional inquiry** – PLCs need a structure based around professional inquiry. Without a focus on collective professional inquiry, PLCs become just another staff meeting, and time is a precious resource in any school. Conversations should follow an inquiry approach ideally with a focus on key instructional issues (see British Columbia example below).

4. **Supportive leadership and school environment:** In order to run effectively PLCs need to be supported by their school leaders and provided with the necessary structures for effective collaboration. Seemingly simple organisational issues like effectively siphoning off time for teachers to work exclusively in PLCs can derail the entire PLC process if not done properly.

Links between PLCs and inquiry practices – an example from British Columbia (Canada)

In her summary of the PLC literature Shirley Hord notes that professional learning communities could also be termed 'communities of continuous inquiry and improvement'.[10] This is how PLCs are viewed in British Columbia, Canada, where schools have used PLCs as their main form of professional learning since the early 2000s alongside a structured inquiry process they call the 'spirals of inquiry approach'.
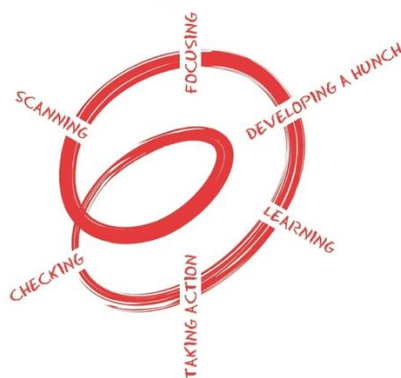

Figure 1: Timperley, Kaser &, Halbert (2014)

The approach in British Columbia is highly structured, and PLCs are used as an opportunity for analysis of student needs, reflection on practice and ongoing professional development. There are

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[9] Caine and Caine (2010)
[10] Hord (1997)

six action-oriented stages:

1. **Scanning**: Asking carefully crafted questions of learners that help teachers to understand the students' perspectives on how and what they are learning.
2. **Focusing**: Exploring the issues identified in the student feedback, as well as student assessment data and other evidence, to identify priority areas for further enquiry.
3. **Developing a hunch**: As individuals and as a group, teachers develop a hypothesis designed to expose the beliefs and practices that have a bearing on this issue: what are we doing that's contributing positively and negatively?
4. **New professional learning**: Seeking out fresh ideas and developing new practice by engaging with colleagues, other schools and with research evidence.
5. **Taking action**: Applying new learning and practice with a clear sense of the impact we expect to have for learners as we do so.
6. **Checking**: Collecting and analysing data to make sure we had the impact we expected. Have we made the difference we hoped for? If not, why not? What else do we need to do?

More details on the spiral of inquiry steps can be found here including details on what each step does and (importantly) does not entail.

Other international examples of PLCs

Many other high performing systems use PLCs as part of their professional learning. A comparative analysis of high performing systems by Jensen et al (2016) found commonalities between the approaches of PLCs in British Columbia, Singapore and Shanghai (all top performers on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)).

	British Columbia Learning Communitites	Shanghai Research and Lesson Groups	Singapore Professional Learning Groups
Stage 1 Assess	1. Scanning (evidence of student learning) 2. Focusing (prioritizing)	1. Set research question based on student learning	1. Collect and analyze data 2. Discuss focus for improvement cycle
Stage 2 Develop	3. Developing a hunch 4. New professional learning	2. Review research evidence 3. Prioritize teaching strategies	3. Propose new approaches
Stage 3 Evaluate	5. Taking action 6. Checking (assessing impact)	4. Test strategies in class; observe and discuss each other's lessons 5. Analyze evidence, identify improvements, and publish results	4. Implement new approaches and measure impact 5. Review, reflect and present on what worked

Figure: Jenson et al (2016) Summary of PLC commonalities.

PLCs in each system begin by assessing student needs, developing new approaches based on research and external professional learning and then testing and evaluating those new approaches.

The full report by Jensen et al can be found here and additional professional learning resources used by the high performing systems can be found here.

Using Pivot as part of your PLC – within or between schools

The Pivot approach is ideally suited to a PLC within a school, or between schools. The collection of evidence-based insights on effective teaching, via student feedback, is a first step in identifying a PLC's strengths and development areas. Further evidence may be collected via Pivot's classroom observations instrument, and also bolstered by other data, such as student progress and achievement.

We encourage individual teachers to consider their results reports with others in their school, and ideally within a PLC context. This will enable teachers to consider group similarities and complementary skills, learn from each other, and keep each other 'on track' in adopting a continuous approach to innovation and improving in the classroom so as to demonstrate growth by the end of the period.

The flexibility of the Pivot approach assists PLCs in other ways:
- For already established PLCs, **extra questions may be added** to the Pivot student survey for specific classes to gather student feedback on specific teaching approaches or learning priorities.
- For **PLCs across groups of schools** (e.g. a regional cluster) Pivot can prepare aggregated reports to highlight complementary and contrasting strengths and development areas.
- Pivot's **expert teacher trainers, data coaches, and counsellors** can help individuals and/or groups of teachers to interrogate and debrief on their results, enabling them to chart a constructive approach to improving teaching practice.

In 2018 we are also delighted to be introducing a new feature in the Pivot approach – a Leader 360 degree survey instrument – helping teachers at the Highly Accomplished and Lead levels, as well as mid-level managers, to understand their growth trajectory as school leaders. This is ideally suited to help PLC leaders to drive improvements in student learning outcomes across the school.

Sign up to our Quarterly Research Update by emailing us at info@pivotpl.com to join our mailing list, or call the Pivot team on 04818 PIVOT to find out more.

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