

Familiarisation and deepening understanding



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

Exploring the idea of professional learning communities

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Purpose of this activity

This activity, using illustrative quotes from staff in project schools, helps promote and deepen understanding of professional learning community (PLC) characteristics and processes. The aim is to match the quotes to listed

characteristics and processes, thereby getting a more concrete picture of what PLCs look, sound and feel like, and the different ways staff work to promote PLCs.



Characteristics and processes activity

Using this activity

This can be done as two separate activities or as a single session. People may gain more from it if they have either read the think piece on ***Creating and sustaining an effective professional learning community*** in Booklet 2 or if there has been a short input on PLCs.

- 1 Start in small groups – two to four people per group. Sort the first set of quotes by characteristic headings, placing relevant quotes in the space by the appropriate heading. (15 minutes)
- 2 Share and discuss your decisions as a whole staff group. (15 minutes)
- 3 In small groups, sort the next set of quotes by process headings, placing relevant quotes in the space by the appropriate heading. (10 minutes)
- 4 Share and discuss your decisions as a whole staff group. (10 minutes)
- 5 Reflect together on what you have learnt from doing this activity, using the questions at the end of these materials. Consider whether you need to spend further time deepening your understanding and, if so, how you will do this, and how you will move forward. (10 minutes)

Resources

You will need one set of resources for each small group together with a copy of the resource card ***What is a professional learning community? A summary*** (see introductory source materials).

Identifying characteristics

You will need a copy of the characteristics chart for each small group (see pages 4–5). This will need to be large enough to fit quotes on it so we suggest you copy it to A3 size. You will also need to copy and cut out a set of PLC characteristics quotes for each group (see pages 6–7).

Identifying processes

You will need a copy of the processes chart for each small group (see page 8). This will need to be large enough to fit quotes on it so we suggest you copy it to A3 size. You will also need to copy and cut out a set of PLC processes quotes for each group (see pages 9–10). *These should be photocopied on different coloured paper to distinguish the processes quotes from the characteristics quotes.*

Each group will also need adhesive or fasteners to stick the quotes onto the charts, and a copy of the questions for reflection and dialogue (pages 11–12).

Characteristics chart photocopy this chart onto A3 paper

Characteristics of PLCs

Shared values and vision

Collective responsibility for learning

Collaboration focused on learning

Group as well as individual learning

Characteristics chart photocopy this chart onto A3 paper

Characteristics of PLCs

Reflective professional enquiry

Openness, networks and partnerships

Inclusive membership

Mutual trust, respect and support

Characteristics quotes photocopy this page and cut up quotes



I feel hugely valued. It's a fantastic environment to work in. Investors in People came in the other day and talked to me. I told them, "I don't need to work. I come here because I like it."

The ethos... is one where we help each other. We have a policy within the school, we're always working in teams of two. A lot of the students... have poor head control so their head could all of a sudden go forward, and... using the hoist... they could bang their head on the bar. So you do need two people to do it.

We all do our bit. The caretaker is brilliant; he goes on school visits with the children and gets involved. We have two cleaners, they are here one hour a day... but they are always invited to anything that we arrange... they are seen as part of the community.

We looked at literacy and said, "Well, let's try this – that would work" and we tried it out. Together we worked out the strategies that will really work. I've learned from her to stand back a bit. I'm all action – "Let's do this," and she says "Let's look at it". We complement each other – we work well together.

We all believe we want to get the children to be confident and have lots of self-esteem, and be able to be independent. We all want that. To be able to leave home and be independent. To be active learners, to do everything themselves and not rely on us too much.

One of the problems with a school like this is that we are all in one-person departments. So to develop your department you often have to go outside of the school. In my first year I learnt a tremendous amount from being an examiner and working with teachers from other schools to moderate our pupils' work.

Virtually every policy that we write we put the emphasis on teaching and learning; if it's a behaviour policy, a rewards and sanctions policy, an equal opportunities policy, we try to put the emphasis on teaching and learning.

I believe there is a lot of expertise in the profession and teachers ought to be more confident about sharing this. There are networks within each school. However you have got to be linked up to other external agencies otherwise you do not move forward.

(Staff) pop in and out of each other's classrooms because we observe each other quite a lot... in our department I've asked if I can see our head of department teach, just because it's interesting to see different teaching styles... we nip in and out to nick ideas really.

Getting people who've only been here a few weeks to write case notes on kids and then lead a whole INSET day, when they then present it back to the staff who are already supposed to know this stuff, was fantastic. I've known some of the pupils they were talking about for four years and I learned something new myself.



Characteristics quotes photocopy this page and cut up quotes



There's no real pecking order. The beauty of this place is that everybody works as a team. There is no one who would say, "This job is far superior to that one", whether it be the headteacher or the cleaner. They are all part of the same team and it is a quality team.

One of the concerns that came up in the questionnaire (student survey) was homework and coursework and I want to try and set up a website for GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) geography students and parents so the information will be available for them... We're aiming to give them much more choice within the homework.

Working at this school has offered me fantastic opportunities to think about myself as a teacher and a person. It does keep me enthusiastic. I get exhausted. I love teaching in this environment. It's so exciting. It's valuable learning for adults and for children.

I think (the external links) have been the most crucial thing in this school's development. It allows you to widen your understanding.

There are three teachers teaching the same group because we teach in units at the same time. It's definitely a shared responsibility to get them through and we all pull together.

When some child comes through the door you immediately twig there's something... if a child's speech or comprehension is not there. We just start talking about it – the person who has the child in the group may say, "I'm really worried about X; he doesn't seem able to concentrate. Let's all watch over the next couple of weeks."

It's a lovely atmosphere here. It's a lovely school... Everyone is going to have blips and there are going to be certain things where you think, "I wish I'd done that". But you learn from it and at the end of the day, if you have the respect of the other staff, which we have, we all learn from each other.

The sharing we do as a group... is across subjects. What we have learned together is how to teach EBD (emotional and behavioural difficulties) children. We always listen to each other, talk to each other at the end of every day and our practice has grown up together. By exchanging views, experiences and nightmare stories we have been able to build up a bank of techniques and ways of how to respond to situations as they have occurred.

If I'm doing an observation on a child I'm doing it in a much more detailed way this year. I'm thinking about the significance. It's informing my planning. I'm starting to group children together with targets and involve them in mini-projects to extend their interests.

"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". (Students' quotes)



Processes chart photocopy this chart onto A3 paper

Processes of PLCs

Optimising resources and structures to promote the PLC

Promoting professional learning

Evaluating and sustaining the PLC

Leading and managing the PLC

Processes quotes photocopy this page and cut up quotes



We started on the Reception (kindergarten) class and Year 1 base. We made the classrooms into subject specialist bases – science, English, maths. 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.

So we talk about learning all the time now in all communications. Even in my newsletters now I'll have a section on learning and teaching, and right at the end of my newsletter will be a little bit on behaviour and discipline, which comes right at the end.

We gather round the kettle! And we do it in my room. For example the head of department said, "Look, can we look at our timetable? We're all free there, so if we're not on cover can we go over it?"... so tomorrow at certain times we're going to get together and just look at our marking for the GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) and tweak it and talk about it.

I've become a qualified facilitator to help other staff in the school who want to progress onto management, to help them feel they can voice their opinion, even if they're not on a level in management or leadership.

He said we must provide the opportunities for staff here to motivate them... because even if they're not in a position of so-called responsibility... they are very much part of the school and of value... and I think that's where we are going because we are trying to lead from the middle and give everybody the opportunities.

Now that I am in a management position myself I am having to think more carefully about leadership. I think the mission statement for the school and the way it was put together by the staff says a lot about leadership here. It went through several drafts with inputs from many people.

So we've done a process for behaviour policy... which is around effective restraint and other strategies, so you never put yourself in a position where a child's behaviour becomes out of control... From that, the whole staff will do the behaviour policy, and that actually includes our dinner ladies as well. So it was one of the few times when absolutely everybody has done a course like that.

Although it's been done to death, we went back to basics (good lesson). Everyone was in the session; the LSAs (learning support assistants) too. I had something we felt I could work with, setting the scene, and gave them the focus... We looked at a video of a good lesson and then went back to department groups to discuss what were three points.

I want them to question, "Is this the best use of money?"... There isn't a bottomless pit of money. They have to take responsibility for making decisions about how (continuing professional development money) is spent.



Processes quotes photocopy this page and cut up quotes



We want to build on the positive. The purpose of our new (network) bid is to help answer the question, "How do we know it is making a difference?"

I feel that the staff need access to me informally when they can. It's nice to have a cup of coffee with them and sit down and usually that's a time for laughter and teasing and talking about football or what was on TV last night... I think it's important to do that, because we all spend so much time here that I don't believe it's healthy for conversation to be purely about professional matters. It helps to build those relationships.

Since (the family support unit) first joined us we've worked on a whole range of strategies to bond, I suppose, as a new staff group and ensure that we have that common ethos and belief and talk the same language in a way.

Now let's step back a bit and see where this fits into what we are doing and if it does fit into what we're doing, what staff have we got available for this initiative?

I am modelling partly things I do believe strongly in, like the fact that morale is paramount, staff morale. I just think having a positive feeling staff and a place where people actually enjoy coming to work just counts for so much in a school, not just for the children but for the staff commitment and everything else. I just feel at all times I want staff to want to work here really.

Professional development remains at the core of school improvement and both schools continue to benefit greatly from the sharing of good practice. Last year we had groups of staff coming over to observe lessons and we will continue to do that... Purely voluntary. We just gave staff the time to go over if they so wished.

One of my targets is to link with another curriculum co-ordinator and do dance sessions with them so that the curriculum areas are linked in some way.



Questions for reflection and dialogue

What struck you as you were sorting the quotes?



Were there any characteristics or processes that seemed to be under-represented in the quotes? If so, can you think of a reason why this might be?



Questions for reflection and dialogue

Do you feel you need to do anything else to deepen your understanding of professional learning communities?

If yes, what, and how will you go about it?

If no, what do you now need to do to move forward?



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Familiarisation and deepening understanding

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Setting professional learning communities in an international context

Broadening the learning community: key messages

Exploring the idea of professional learning communities

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