

Series Editors: Rashmi Diwan and Charu Smita Malik

Module 10

# ESTABLISHING AND SUSTAINING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES FOR ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE IN SCHOOL EDUCATION

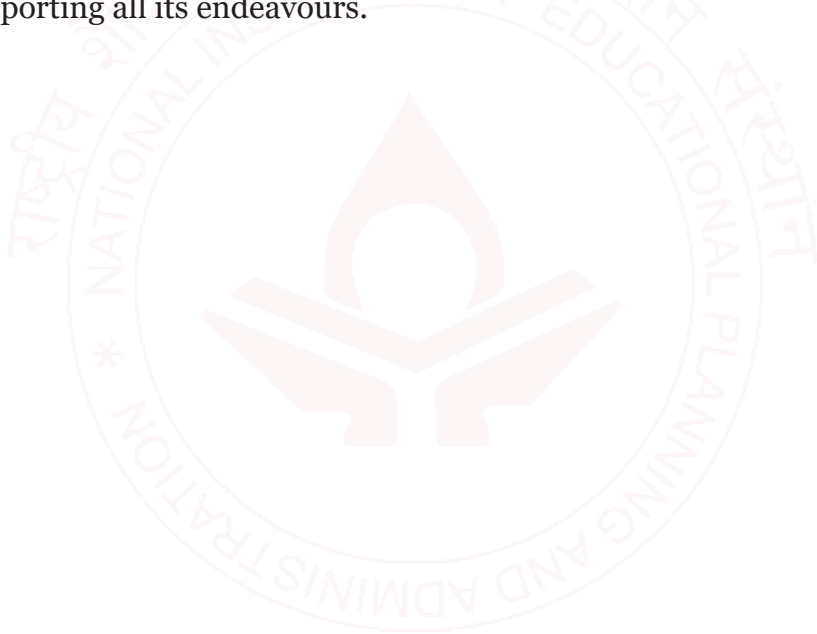
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**KEY AREA  
TRANSFORMING TEACHING LEARNING  
PROCESSES**

**ESTABLISHING AND SUSTAINING  
PROFESSIONAL LEARNING  
COMMUNITIES FOR ACADEMIC  
EXCELLENCE IN SCHOOL EDUCATION**

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## Introduction

There has been an increasing demand on schools for higher level of pupil achievement, and schools are expected to improve and reform in order to respond to the educational needs of the children. These expectations are accompanied by calls for accountability at the school level which creates an urgent need for developing instructional skills of school heads to promote good teaching and high-level learning for all children. In this regard, it is considered that the school heads and administrators must be a continuous learners and that they need to be aware of the recent educational developments and research trends. One of the ways through which they can update their knowledge on a continuous basis is by constant sharing of information and experience with one another. This community of learners among school heads/teachers creates a vibrant professional group that learns from one another and contributes to the professional development of all. It is this understanding of collaboration among the professionals that we will attempt to learn in this module.

Forming a Professional Learning Community (PLC) is an exciting task and this module will equip you and your peer group to begin this process. Section 1 is intended to build an understanding on the basic concept of PLC and the purpose of formation of a PLC. Section 2 builds on the understanding gained in section 1 and dives deeper into the benefits of a PLC for teachers and how teachers of same discipline (vertical) as well as of other disciplines (horizontal) can collaborate together. The module adopts a case study method to explain two types of Professional Learning Communities that can be formed in the setting of schools. Section 3 will

guide school heads in forming PLCs with their colleagues.



## Learning Outcomes

**On completion of the module, school leaders will be able to**

- Build an understanding of the concept of PLC and purpose of its formation
- Understand different types of PLC and their usage in different situations
- Get an insight of how a PLC can be formed and the importance of collaborating with peers in school context

Sections	Topic
Section 1	Professional Learning Communities: Concept and Purpose
Section 2	Professional Learning Community for Teachers
Section 3	Community of School Heads



## SECTION 1

### PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES: CONCEPT AND PURPOSE

**Learning Objective:** School leaders will be able to understand the concept of 'PLC' and its relevance in the context where it is used.

**Key Words:** PLC; Collaboration; Collegiality; Community Learning



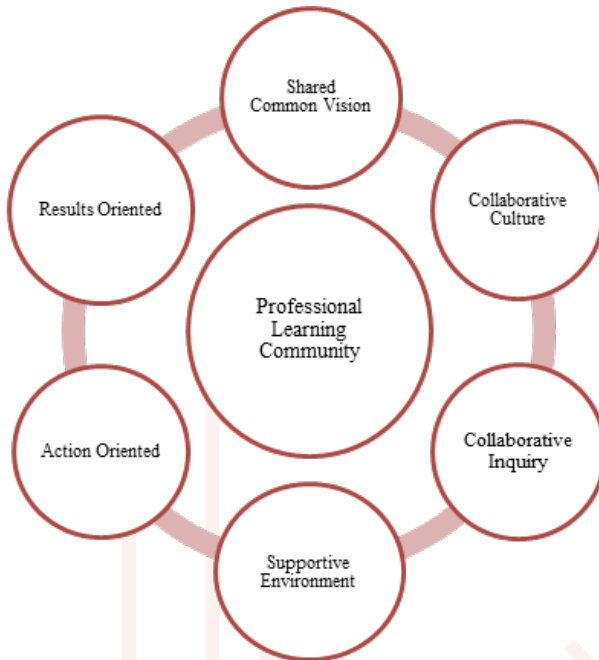


## Introduction

A Professional Learning Community (PLC) is “a group of professionals who share a concern, a set of problems or passion about a topic, who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger et. al., 2002). Here, educators are committed to working collaboratively in the ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research in order to achieve better results for the students they serve (DuFour et. al., 2007). A PLC is a way of working together, sharing ideas and being supported by one another to update their knowledge and skills. A PLC engages the entire group of professionals in coming together for learning within a supportive self-created community. A PLC is an effective method of cross learning with peers, dealing with teacher isolation, helping the teachers to empower their own practice and instilling confidence in them. It facilitates and creates a culture of collaboration among teachers and other professionals. A PLC helps in challenging the teachers to learn new practices and unlearn the old beliefs and practices.

## The Purpose of a PLC

It is believed that in this era, no teacher/head teacher/education official can work in isolation. They need to get connected with their peer groups for mutual experience and knowledge sharing. Thus, we can say that PLCs, when formed, serve two broad purposes: (i) improving the knowledge and skills of head teachers and system level officials through collaborative study, expertise exchange, sharing of experiences and knowledge, and (ii) improving school functioning for enhancing achievement and attainment of students. PLCs often function as a form of action research in which teachers actively participate to continually question, reassess, refine and improve teaching strategies and knowledge. The various facets of a PLC can be understood graphically as shown in figure 1.



*Figure 1: Various facets of a PLC*

## Let us sum up

Participating in Professional Learning is useful for teachers, head teachers and system level functionaries as they can share their knowledge and issues with peers who are also facing similar kind of challenges. It also creates collaborative culture and professionals do not remain isolated. A PLC creates a forum in which the professionals hold mutual discussions and get feedback from their peers, which helps them to grow professionally and individually. A PLC also helps in the creation of a common vision and strategies for improving learning levels of students.



## SECTION 2

# PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY FOR TEACHERS

**Learning Objective:** School heads and teachers will be able to understand the process of formation of different type of PLCs as well as the benefit of PLCs for teachers.

**Key Words:** PLC; Team Learning; Professional Development of Teachers; Workplace Learning

## Introduction

Education does not end when you finish your degree. In fact, it is the beginning of your professional life. Teachers need to find new ways to get through the diverse spectrum of students. Therefore, the more professional development opportunities teachers get, the more likely students are to succeed. Professional learning communities, as stated by DuFour (2004: 8), is a systematic process in which teachers work together to analyse and improve their classroom practice. A PLC provides teachers space and opportunity to continuously update their knowledge and skills. When teachers work together in regularly scheduled meetings to discuss specific issues, that strengthens learning and contributes to improved teacher practice and higher achievement for all students. A PLC creates a culture of learning in organisation in which teachers and students continuously learn. Here, such norms of team behaviour are created that allow teachers to express their perspective. PLCs are at the heart of collaborative teacher practice. We have already discussed in section 1 that PLCs revolve around collaboration. In this unit, we will discuss as to how this collaboration is beneficial to teachers and whether the teachers of same subject collaborate with each other or it could also be across different subjects.

Types of Professional Learning Community:

1. Vertical Professional Learning Community
2. Horizontal Professional Learning Community

## Vertical Professional Learning Community

A vertical PLC corresponds to the coming together of a community of peers belonging to a single department in a school/cluster/block for addressing a problem such as clarifying certain concepts of mathematics, physics or any other subject.

Ms Indu has recently joined as School Head of Govt Girls Secondary School, Jaunpur, which has the strength of 600 students and the school has grades I-X. Ms Indu met the District Officer, Mr Robin, and posed a problem that she has recently joined and she is not clear about certain rules and regulations. Mr Robin suggested that she should convene her school a meeting of senior principals of her cluster and few officers from education department. First, she should go through the rules and then discuss her doubts with them. She was nominated and sent for the capacity building programme on School Leadership and Management. Her other concern was that though six teachers are available in her school, only two teachers can teach mathematics and science subjects. Another major challenge in this block is that NAS result of grade III and V children is abysmally low; especially in mathematics. The School Head, Ms Indu, and mathematics teacher, Ms Snehlata, met the Block Education Officer, Mr Sharma, who then convened a meeting of other Block Education Officers and discussed the matter with them. A few of the school heads whose schools had shown good results in mathematics were also invited. The Block Education Officer shared the agenda with all the invitees before they came for the meeting. One of the school heads agreed to send two teachers twice a week to Ms Indu's school and also ensured that they would share the assignment sheets and the learning material which they have generated through interactions with the children of her school.

Mr Sharma called a formal meeting at the block headquarters in which mathematics teachers of different schools, principals and head teachers of schools and a few experts were invited. Ms Snehlata put forth her

queries on methods and their transaction methodology of certain concepts of mathematics such as complex numbers and integrals, to which the other members including the experts responded. The process of PLC was very interactive and Ms Snehlata freely put forth all her doubts without feeling intimidated. She was thus able to achieve clarity on the concepts with which she was struggling. Ms Snehlata and colleagues were relieved that PLC acted as a sounding board for them.

The second point of the agenda was to learn from the best practices of experts. One of the experts offered to take an impromptu 10-minutes mock classroom with the other members on how to facilitate the students in a way that was understandable to them. His teaching style was to use a step-by-step approach, showing that many topics are linked. The mock session helped Ms Snehlata and others to gain an exposure into an interesting way of facilitating mathematics teaching to students. Next, a team of three members of the PLC together helped teachers in designing small assessments through which they could gauge if the students had understood the concepts. The District Education Officer, Block Education Officer and Principal facilitated the process of formation of this PLC.

Towards the end, thanks by each of the members revealed that the PLC meeting was regarded as a non-hierarchical and interesting platform to raise subject concerns, take professional help from one another, improve their practice and learn on how to assess students about what they had learnt. This PLC was fruitful from the teachers' standpoint as it particularly focussed on their professional development.

## Horizontal Professional Learning Community

A horizontal PLC would involve a community of peers who want to collaboratively find solutions to concerns that are common to their teaching-learning processes across all subjects. In this design, we will understand how a PLC is useful for teachers' professional development as well as in improving the knowledge or/and skills of students. In the earlier exercise on vertical PLCs, the focus was more on the professional development of mathematics teachers to improve transactional processes so that student learning enhances.

Let us listen to the concern of Dr Vishesh, School Principal. He was worried about the deteriorating writing standards among students. He was particularly disturbed by the writing style of answers that he believed could have an adverse effect on the academic life of students, especially those who would pursue higher education. Due to this concern, Dr Kumar often discussed this issue with other staff members of the Arts subjects stream (history, political science, english, hindi, etc) during lunch breaks and on other informal occasions. To his surprise, as much as he shared this issue with other colleagues, he found that even they held the same concern, whether they taught political science, sociology or english.

One day, during an informal discussion, Dr Kumar, Ms Smriti Khanna (Political Science) and Dr K Vimal (History) wondered if something could be done about the deteriorating writing standards of secondary level students. Mr Vimal had attended one of the PLC meetings in another school and he suggested that a horizontal PLC could be set up in this school drawing faculty from all sections of Arts and Commerce subjects. They would collaboratively work on improving the 'academic writing skills' of the students. Ms Khanna suggested they could informally share the idea of PLC with other colleagues during the coming one week in order to build a consensus. In no time, informal discussions led to an agreement among many. Encouraged by the response, the three teachers

--- Dr Kumar, Ms Khanna and Dr Vimal --- went up to the Principal of the school to share this idea of setting up a horizontal PLC. The Principal was at first doubtful as such cross-sectional subject meetings for academic purpose were never organised in the conventional routine of a school. However, the trio were able to convince the Principal and decided to organise the very first horizontal PLC in their school.

Dr Kumar, Dr Vimal and Ms Khanna discussed at length about the constitution of PLC, its purpose and the outcomes. They found that 6 teachers had volunteered to join this PLC. Hence, in order to make the PLC more effective, it was decided that they would conduct the PLC as a workshop rather than as a meeting. In the coming week, they created a google group of all the teacher members who had volunteered to be part of this horizontal PLC, and posted two documents on the group mail:

1. A Note on Background Work: The note asked the volunteer faculty to take a month's time and identify gaps in academic writing of students. It could relate to the grammar usage, sentence construction, paragraph construction, perspective building, framing of the research argument or the research question, the summarisation and presentation of findings, etc. These were just suggested themes and faculties were asked to make a specific list of gaps in academic writing of students in their respective disciplines.
2. A PLC Workshop Design: This was to be conducted in a month (See Table 1.)



## First Workshop (10 July 2022)

On the day of the workshop, 20 teachers belonging to 6 sections of Arts and Commerce streams in the school reached the auditorium at 0930 a.m..They also carried laptops for collaborative work.

## Objectives of the PLC Meeting

1. To identify the reasons for gaps in academic writing skills of students
2. To collaboratively solve the problem solve on strategies that can be useful for improving the academic writing skills of students
3. To create action plans for implementation of strategies to assess the students' progress

**Table 1**  
**Workshop Design for First PLC**

Time	Process	Facilitators	Intended Outcomes
0930-1015 hrs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Welcome by the Facilitators of PLC</li><li>• Introduction of participants</li><li>• Brief presentation on a PLC, its objectives, sharing of the workshop design</li></ul>	Dr Praveen Kumar, Ms Smriti Khanna and Dr KVimal	Orientation to a PLC formation, its objectives and usefulness for allfaculty

1015 – 1030 hrs	Formation of 6 groups		
1030 – 1130 hrs	Brainstorming in groups on identifying reasons for gaps, designing implementation strategies, intended outcomes and assessment	Group members	Group strategies to improve writing skills
1130-1145 hrs	Tea Break		
1145 – 1300 hrs	Group presentations on action plans	Dr Praveen Kumar, Ms Smriti Khanna and Dr KVimal	
1300-1400 hrs	Lunch Break		
1400-1530 hrs	Group work to make changes according to what each group learnt from other groups	Group members	Learning strategies/ assessments from other groups and if they can be included in each group's action plan
1530-1545 hrs	Tea		
1545-1630 hrs	Finalising action plans	Group members	

1630-1700 hrs	Future course of action: Vocal feedback Conclusion	Dr Praveen Kumar, Ms Smriti Khanna and Dr KVimal	Decide on the outcomes for the next review workshop to be held one month later
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## Objectives of the Review Workshop

1. To review the implementation of action plan for improving the academic writing skills of students
2. To further modify or change the action plan for improving the academic writing skills of students

**Table 2**  
**Workshop Design for Review of PLC**

Time	Process	Facilitators	Intended Outcomes
0930-1015 hrs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Welcome by the Facilitators of PLC</li> <li>• Sharing of half day agenda</li> </ul>	Dr Praveen Kumar, Ms Smriti Khanna and Dr KVimal	
1015 – 1030 hrs	Brief presentations on <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What the groups attempted with the students?</li> <li>• What were the strategies that worked?</li> <li>• What were the strategies that did not work?</li> </ul>	Group presentations	Learnings for each group

1030 – 1130 hrs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Brainstorming in groups on redesigning goals, implementation strategy, intended outcomes and assessment</li> <li>Include learning from other groups</li> </ul>	Group presentations	Redesigning action plan for next two months
1130-1145 hrs	Tea Break		
1145 – 1245 hrs	Any new aspects learnt on PLC, learning or assessment style of students	Individual/group observations	Sharing of knowledge/best practices
1245-1300 hrs	Future course of action Conclusion		
1300-1400 hrs	Lunch Break		

At the end of this half-day workshop, the groups decided to continue the implementation plan for the next twomonths and decided to meet again for another round of the PLC.

This Horizontal PLC helped teachers of different subjects come together, dwell upon a common challenge and implement strategies to improve student competencies.

## Let us sum up

To meet the expectations and diverse needs of learners, the convention of artisan teaching in solo-practice classroom has to be replaced by collaborative teaching in which teachers continuously develop their content knowledge and pedagogical skills through discussions and brainstorming. The meeting takes place in a more structured manner as teachers meet with a set agenda and issues are discussed with the view to collaboratively solve problem and implement changes.





## SECTION 3

### COMMUNITY OF SCHOOL HEADS

**Learning Objective:** School leaders will understand the significance of working in close collaboration with their peer group for improving learning outcomes of students.

**Key words:** Community of schools; Peer sharing of experiences; Professional knowledge

## Introduction

In the previous unit you learnt about the purpose of PLC and its usefulness to the teachers. It is felt that the teachers will be able to create and participate in PLCs if the school heads facilitate their participation and understands the importance of sharing knowledge in these forums. If the school heads themselves maintain a network of colleagues to gain new knowledge they would also encourage their teachers to be a part of such community. Networks that support improvement and innovation by enabling schools to collaborate well beyond individual school gates offer a powerful lever for system wide reform (Hopkins, 2007: 2). Innovative school heads devote time for their own professional development. They remain abreast with the latest educational developments and for this they read and study incessantly, attend workshops, seminars and conferences. The most important is that they remain connected to their peers and actively participate in the professional meet. In this unit, we will focus on the advantages of PLCs to school heads. This unit emphasises the importance of creating a purposeful and community climate of shared values and vision among the school heads.

## Community of School Leaders

How do you feel as a school principal?, I asked Mrs. Datta, one of the newly appointed school principals at an exploratory workshop to identify the leadership needs of school heads at NIEPA and pat came the reply; “Lonely”. This one word nearly shook me for a moment, and I became curious to probe further to understand her perspective.

She explained, “as a teacher, I had fellow teachers with whom I could share my queries, my thoughts, my grievances, my frustrations and of course my satisfying moments too. But the designation of principal has suddenly distanced me from my staff. I have formal meetings but if I attempt to talk informally to somebody, they are labelled as my favourites



and others distance them as well, I cannot share my frustrations and doubts since I have turned into a leader by virtue of my position and I hardly find time and opportunity to interact with my fellow school principals. Whatever little opportunity we have, is at the cluster or block level meetings which largely begin and end with discussing administrative issues and circulars. There is hardly any academic exchange or learning.”

- Can we have a community of schools?
- Can we come together as school principals and share our knowledge, experiences, challenges, our learning, our success and of course our frustrations ?
- How beneficial would it be to have a community of professionals coming together for the cause of learning?

Look at the video where a group of school heads discussing at length about different aspects in a setting of a Professional Learning Community. There can be three purposes of a PLC of school heads: knowledge sharing, sharing of best practices and problem solving. This video will guide you in creating a PLC with your colleagues and peers.

### **Video Resource (link)**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GTVT\\_9PVI0U&list=PLSiPjXQ11pfYldEETaPC50tpAEn6alc3w&index=33](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GTVT_9PVI0U&list=PLSiPjXQ11pfYldEETaPC50tpAEn6alc3w&index=33)

### **Hypothetical Guide to setting up of a PLC with school head/Community of school head**

1. One of the school head calls up his/her colleagues saying that he/she is facing a problem in the school- which can be related to any school process. The school heads may also communicate through mail with other members.
2. The group of school heads decide that they can meet for 2 hours on the

- coming Sunday for brainstorming, discussing and sharing.
3. The convenor of the group talks to the concerned school head to understand the problem in detail, and then writes the objective of the meeting. The convenor then shares it with all other members.
  4. The convenor also writes the agenda for the meeting in brief.
  5. On the day of the meeting of the PLC, the group sits down and discusses on the issue. There could be other school heads who share their problems or share if they have learnt something new.
  6. At the end of the discussion, the convenor consolidates by sharing the outcomes, in brief.

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## **Additional reading**

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## Assessment: Multiple Choice Questions (MCQs)

Q1. What are Professional Learning Communities?

- a. Groups of people
- b. Groups of professionals such as teachers or head teachers
- c. Learning aids
- d. Social communities

Q2. What are key purposes of PLC?

- a. Collaborative enquiry and action orientation
- b. Conflict creation and action orientation
- c. Shared vision and conflict creation
- d. Collaborative enquiry, shared vision and action orientation

Q3. What are horizontal PLCs of teachers?

- a. A meeting of teachers
- b. A meeting of teachers of different subjects
- c. A professional space for teachers of different subjects across same grades to discuss academic issues

- d. A professional space for teachers of different subjects across different grades to discuss academic issues

Q4. What are vertical PLCs of teachers?

- a. A meeting of teachers
- b. A meeting of teachers of different subjects
- c. A professional space for teachers of same subjects across same grades to discuss academic issues
- d. A professional space for teachers of same subjects across different grades to discuss academic issues

Q5. What are the issues of discussion in a PLC of School heads?

- a. Administrative grievance
- b. Knowledge sharing and problem solving
- c. Knowledge sharing, sharing of best practices and problem solving
- d. Sharing of best practices and problem solving





## Modules in this Series

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