
Can online learning communities achieve the goals of traditional professional learning communities? What the literature says

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Key findings

Studies find that online communities of educators can achieve the goals of professional learning communities (PLCs), but the research is methodologically limited—and too fragmented to offer clear prescriptions. The literature reflects current thinking and practice mainly for traditional PLCs, with discussions of online PLCs generally focused on how to move traditional PLC activities online. The aim is to expand opportunities for teachers to reflect and collaborate without the usual limitations of time, space, and pace.

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Summary

Professional learning communities (PLCs)—teams of educators who get together regularly to exchange ideas—have sprung up to meet school districts’ growing interest in promoting professional development that engages teachers and administrators. PLCs meet to develop lesson plans, monitor student progress, assess instructional effectiveness, and identify professional learning needs. The ultimate goal is to raise student achievement by adapting teaching and classroom practices based on learning and interchanges during PLC meetings.

The Internet and mobile communication technologies have greatly expanded opportunities for teams of educators to reflect and collaborate with each other and experts outside their schools—and even outside their districts—for learning, joint lesson planning, and problem solving. These electronic platforms provide ready access to knowledge and resources without the usual limitations of time, space, and pace. Hybrid PLCs combine online interactions with the face-to-face interactions of traditional PLCs.

This review of the literature on online PLCs responds to a request from district and school administrators in the Regional Educational Laboratory Mid-Atlantic Region for information on using online PLCs to engage their teachers in professional development. The review looked at advantages, challenges, and emerging best practices.

What are the advantages and challenges of online and hybrid professional learning communities?

Overall, the evidence indicates that online communities of teachers can achieve the goals of PLCs. The literature finds that teachers who collaborate online are engaged with the group, develop a sense of community, improve their knowledge of subject and pedagogical content, and intend to modify their instructional practices accordingly. Flexibility is presented as the strongest advantage of online PLCs over the traditional face-to-face environment in facilitating teachers’ learning. The online environment enables teachers to access and share knowledge in a timely and comprehensive manner. The online environment is also consistently found to be better at promoting self-reflection on learning and instructional practices than is the face-to-face environment, even though both models appear to contribute equally to learning and mastering subject content.

The online environment is not without challenges, however. Studies indicate that teachers’ motivation to engage their peers and contribute regularly to the group was lower online than face-to-face, perhaps because of the greater isolation of teachers who collaborate in a completely online environment.

What are some emerging best practices in the design and implementation of online and hybrid professional learning communities?

Best practices recommended in the recent literature for promoting interaction in PLCs of all kinds include structuring collaboration; allowing participants to shape the goals, structure, and assessment of the collaboration; pairing experts with less experienced learners; and designing activities that promote self-reflection. In general, the literature on planning PLCs sees the key decision as determining how much freedom to allow participants in structuring and directing the group’s collaboration. Regardless of how PLCs are organized,

online collaboration appears most productive when membership is diverse (in roles, areas, and levels of expertise), the group has an effective moderator, and group members have opportunities to socialize in person (as in hybrid PLCs). Creating opportunities for members to socialize is important for identification and community building, and the literature suggests that hybrid PLCs may be better suited for fostering community.

Implications and future directions

The literature on online and hybrid PLCs is methodologically limited—and too fragmented to offer clear prescriptions for designing and implementing them. Most of the research reflects current thinking and practice for traditional PLCs. Discussions of online PLCs generally focus on how to move traditional PLC activities and functions online to take advantage of the greater flexibility. The research makes the case for hybrid PLCs, which blend the online and face-to-face environments. As theory and research evolve, more consideration should be given to how the key characteristics of the online environment can transform traditional PLCs.