Building Professional Learning Communities in the NT

Introduction

This guide has been developed in conjunction with the 2007 NTAGQTP Building Learning Communities project. The guide is intended to be useful to NT educational groups wishing to develop as professional learning communities (PLCs), whether they be schools, other workplaces, professional associations or cluster-based teams, across all sectors of NT education.

There are three parts to this guide:

- An overview of some of the research into effective professional learning communities and how this is applied in the NT context
- Case studies of ten primary, secondary and cross sectoral 2007 NTAGQTP grant recipients
- Recommendations and practical tips for developing and sustaining PLCs based on the experiences of current and past NTAGQTP participants

It is by no means a definitive guide, but provides pointers to some recent research and publications for further reading.

What is Professional Learning?

NT DEET Professional Learning Policy defines Professional Learning as ‘opportunities or experiences that promote enhanced skills, knowledge, attributes, attitudes and behaviours of staff’ As we begin to describe the ways in which Professional Learning is evolving in our education system we increasingly focus on teacher learning that develops within a culture of collaboration and collective responsibility and is explicitly linked to student learning. Professional Learning in schools is aligned, appropriate, collaborative, supported by leadership at all levels and requires individual commitment. For further information see NT DEET Principles of Professional Learning http://www.deet.nt.gov.au/education/professional_learning

The value of professional learning that is anchored in the workplace is widely recognised. Effective professional development programs draw teachers into an analysis of their current practice and lead them to examine student work. Valuable learning occurs when teachers examine student work in collaboration with colleagues. (Ingvarson et al 2005)

The concept of professional learning communities is not new in education, with many schools and workplaces engaging in professional dialogue, sharing practice and developing collegial relationships. Perhaps what is new is the use of the term to explicitly describe a process of building professional relationships and actively engaging in professional learning within the workplace. Schools that view themselves as professional learning communities acknowledge and value the shared nature of professional learning that is anchored in their daily work.
What is a Professional Learning Community (PLC)?

Sparks (2003) states that ‘important forms of professional learning occur in daily interactions among teachers in which they assist one another in improving lessons, deepening understanding of the content they teach, analysing student work, examining various types of data on student performance, and solving the myriad of problems they face each day.’ This informal and formal interaction between colleagues is central to professional learning communities.

Wenger (n.d) uses the term communities of practice to describe ‘…groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.’ Mitchell, Wood and Young (2001) expand on Wenger’s definition, describing three dimensions of communities of practice: joint enterprise, mutual engagement and a shared repertoire of communal resources.

Fullan (2006) describes PLCs as lasting new collaborative structures, with a focus on building capacity for continuous improvement. He emphasises that true PLCs are not another PL program innovation, but represent an enduring cultural shift where deep learning is central.

DuFour, DuFour, Eakey and Many (2006) note that the term PLC has become commonplace, but is often used ambiguously and in danger of losing all meaning if not clearly defined. The very essence of a learning community, they state, is ‘a focus on and a commitment to the learning of each student.’ They identify five defining characteristics:

- A collaborative culture with a focus on learning for all
- Collective enquiry into best practice for teaching and learning
- An action orientation
- Commitment to continuous improvement
- A results orientation

Avenell (2007) reports that a 2005 DEST study found that highly effective schools operated as professional learning communities and had several common characteristics:

-Explicit expectations of learning
- Aligned values, culture and action
- Focused leadership and teaching
- Networked linkages (school and community)

Sparks (2002a) emphasises the collaborative nature of PLCs: ‘Successful learning communities have at their base high quality relationships, collegiality, reflection, risk taking and collaborative problem solving.’

Other researchers also identify a number of significant factors in defining PLCs.

Kruse (1995) in Fullan, 2006 identifies five critical elements:

- Reflective dialogue
- De-privatisation of practice
- Collective focus on student learning
- Collaboration
- Shared norms and values

Hord (1997) identifies five dimensions:

- Shared and supportive leadership
- Shared vision and values
• Collective learning and application
• Supportive conditions and
• Shared personal practice

Bolam et al (2005) state that the key goal in the development and sustainability of PLCs is ‘continuous learning rather than the implementation of a specific change initiative.’ In addition to those characteristics already listed, they suggest the importance of:
• Group and individual learning
• Openness, networks and partnerships
• Inclusive membership
• Mutual trust, respect and support

Likewise, Hipp and Huffman (2003) found that ‘without a climate of trust and respect, and structures that promote continual learning, it is impossible to build a professional learning community.’

Stoll (2006) suggests a broad international consensus that PLCs consist of ‘a group of people sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way, and operating as a collective enterprise.’

Once again, five key characteristics are highlighted:
• Shared values and vision
• Collective responsibility
• Reflective professional enquiry
• Collaboration
• Group, as well as individual, learning

What makes an effective PLC?

Although varying terms are used, seven key elements recur. Effective PLCs:
• Have shared vision and clarity of purpose
• Focus on learning for all
• Work collaboratively
• Acknowledge collective responsibility and commitment
• Are supported by appropriate structural conditions and human resources
• Have an action orientation
• Reflect on and evaluate learning

Clarity of purpose

PLCs are underpinned by shared values, mutual trust, respect and shared norms. DuFour (2006) describes Four Pillars of PLCs: mission, vision, values and goals, and raises four key questions for PLCs to address:
• Why do we exist?
• What must we become to accomplish our purpose?
• How must we behave to achieve this vision?
• How will we mark our progress?
As schools or workgroups articulate the answers to these four questions they develop clarity of focus in identifying their fundamental purpose, their directions, a collective commitment and clear priorities. From this foundation, the learning community can develop and grow.

A focus on outcomes rather than intentions is also emphasised by DuFour. For PLCs to have true clarity of purpose they must know exactly where they are going, establish assessment and evaluation strategies and set goals that are realistic and can be achieved within time constraints. SMART goals—goals that are strategic and specific, measurable, attainable, results oriented and time bound are central to the successful PLC.

Northern Territory schools have also identified the importance of shared vision and goal setting. Several groups participating in the 2007 NTAGQTP activities articulated the need to have clear vision and direction, but also to pare this back to achievable goals. PLCs in which individuals share a common vision and work toward an identified need are likely to experience success. ‘PLCs should not be driven by one person or reliant on a consultant coming in—they must be needs based.’ (Leonard Freeman, Murrupurtiyanuwa Catholic School)

Focus on learning

Although described in different terms: collective focus on student learning (Kruse 1995); collective learning and application (Hord, 1997); reflective professional enquiry (Stoll, 2006); a focus on learning for all (DuFour 2006) is a key characteristic of PLCs.

This focus is on both student learning and teacher learning and on the learning of individuals within the PLC as well as the PLC as a group. Successful PLCs recognise and value the knowledge individuals bring to a learning community. As new learning occurs, it is shared through professional dialogue and by de-privatising practice.

Moon’s (1999) map of learning outlines five stages in learning: noticing, making sense, making meaning, working with meaning and transformative learning. These stages provide a useful framework for PLCs, guiding purposeful dialogue around student learning as they reflect on practice. Graham (2007) describes purposeful conversations as those that have some underlying goal related to teaching and learning. They are likely to be ‘focused around a specific purpose, such as creating a common assessment, discussing and comparing student work samples in order to ensure consistent grading practices, or using assessment data to identify effective teaching practices.’ DuFour (2006) describes a process of learning and the use of data to inform a commitment to continuous improvement. PLCs gather evidence, develop strategies, implement, analyse and apply new knowledge in an ongoing learning cycle.

Guskey (1999) noted that successful professional learning occurred when there was a focus on learning and learners and engagement in ‘rigorous self analysis’ based on evidence of student learning. The collaborative development of strategies to address student learning-needs must be an integral part of ongoing, job-embedded professional learning.

A focus on learning was evident in many of the NTAGQTP groups. Where this focus was explicit and clearly articulated, PLCs worked toward building the capacity of each individual in a way that was relevant and anchored in classroom practice, with teacher learning directly linked to student learning.

Collaboration

‘Working together to build shared knowledge on the best way to achieve goals and meet the needs of clients is exactly what professionals in any field are expected to do.’ (DuFour 2006) Members of a community of practice have a shared domain of interest and in pursuing this interest they interact and learn together (Wenger). Teachers who share personal practice develop interdependence rather than the independence that was true of many traditional closed-door classrooms. Bolam (2006) describes a teacher learning community, as opposed to a traditional community, as one in which teachers collaborate to reinvent practice and share professional growth.

A recent Australian research review found that teacher quality improves within a collegial, collaborative environment (Zammit et al, 2007). Teachers can further their own professional development by observing the strengths of their teaching partners, sharing workloads, reducing
duplication, and gaining support in exploring innovation. Valuable professional learning occurs where interaction, feedback and cooperation between individuals occurs.

Hipp and Huffman (2003) identify collaboration and problem solving as a critical attribute of effective PLCs, finding that ‘as teachers shared information and developed processes whereby they could work collaboratively, they became more successful in applying strategies that worked well for students.’ In sharing personal practice, teachers discuss, analyse, give and receive feedback and focus on student learning.

Collaborative practices are developed and sustained by strong supportive relationships built on trust, respect and understanding. Avellan (2007) reported that the 2005 DEST study highlighted the importance of ‘relatedness and relationships’ whereby PLC members had created a sense of identity and developed ‘shared beliefs and understandings, interaction and participation, interdependence and concern for individuals.’

NT PLCs also identified the importance of collaborative relationships within PLCs. ‘Don’t underestimate the value of investing in relationships between staff…developing trust to share classroom practice, to suspend your own needs to help others…this interdependence builds relationships.’ (Danielle Little, NT Christian Schools Association)

An inclusive and mutually supportive community is central to effective PLCs. Stoll et al (2006) discusses the expanded definition of the word ‘professional,’ emphasising the possible contribution of support staff, parents and the wider school community in enriching PLCs. This was certainly verified by a number of NT schools, especially in remote locations, where Indigenous assistant teachers and community groups have an essential role within the PLC.

Collective Responsibility and Commitment

Research by Bolam et al (2005) identified individuals’ orientation to change as being central to implementing educational reform. For PLCs to effectively engage with change processes and reinvent practice, a collective focus and the commitment of all individuals is essential. Hipp and Huffman (2003) explored Fullan’s three phases of change—initiation, implementation and institutionalisation, finding that many schools did not move into the third, sustaining phase where a change initiative becomes embedded in the culture of the school. To achieve this phase, a sustained effort based on a shared vision is required, in a climate that supports risk taking and problem solving, with all members of the PLC committed to the process.

A willingness to learn and acknowledgement of responsibility for both individual and group learning is required of all PLC members. Bolam describes a mutually supportive community as the heart of the PLC concept. Just as individual commitment is a key to successful PLCs, so too is the notion of collective responsibility for student learning. Acknowledging this collective responsibility and maintaining a focus on improving outcomes for students can sustain staff commitment and ease teachers’ sense of isolation (Stoll 2006).

A commitment to common goals is essential if PLCs are to be sustained. Graham (2007) describes these common goals as likely to include ‘a commitment to ensuring student learning, a belief in the power of true collaboration, a model of distributed leadership and decision-making, and an ongoing process of reflection and inquiry.’ Wenger also uses the term collective responsibility when describing how communities of practice manage the knowledge they need, focusing on people and social structures that allow members to learn from each other.

A collective commitment guides the behaviour of the PLC (DuFour 2006). Commitment is demonstrated in a number of ways: ensuring supportive structures, processes and resources are in place; modelling what is valued; asking critical questions; celebrating progress and challenging violations of commitments.

NTAGQTP participants agreed that individuals must acknowledge their roles and be actively involved in achieving outcomes in order to sustain PLCs. Ownership of PL is particularly important—where PL projects are driven by a real need, focused on and relevant to the everyday work of teachers, commitment follows. The Kormilda NTAGQTP PLC has a number of small focus areas within the
context of middle schooling, allowing teachers to engage in richer conversations, encouraging a high level of interest which in turn sustains enthusiasm. ‘The commitment of individuals has been very important, with teachers seeing themselves as learners and acknowledging the importance of workplace professional learning’ (Cassandra Holland, Kormilda College). Collective responsibility was also evident in remote Territory PLCs and seen as a way forward when addressing problems of isolation and high staff turnover.

**Supportive Conditions**

Research points to two sets of conditions that facilitate and support effective PLCs—physical conditions such as time, space and funding, and human conditions, including a culture of trust and supportive leadership. Fullan (2006) uses the terms structural conditions and social and human resources. These structural conditions include making time to meet and talk, interdependent teaching roles, physical proximity and effective communication structures. He emphasises the importance of a culture of openness, trust and respect as an essential social and human resource, along with a cognitive skill base and supportive leadership.

Hipp and Huffman (2003) identified supportive conditions as both the ‘springboard for creating PLCs and for supporting and sustaining commitment.’ Collegial relationships are a key condition, where trust and respect within a culture that encourages risk taking and celebrates success, underpin efforts to embed change. Structural conditions again include resources, facilities and communication.

Elmore (2002) also emphasises the importance of collegiality as a supportive condition for improving instructional practice, requiring structures that support interdependence in serious, substantive ways.

Hord (1997) views supportive leadership as a key human resource: ‘transforming a school organization into a learning community can be done only with the sanction of the leaders and the active nurturing of the entire staff's development as a community.’ Others describe a broadened model of leadership (Hipp & Huffman, 2003) and an environment of ‘distributed decision making’ (Graham, 2007). Bolam et al (2005) view leadership as an important resource for PLCs, both principal leadership and shared leadership, stating that ‘in many professional learning communities, head teachers/principals work with teachers in joint enquiry and provide opportunities for teachers to take on a range of leadership roles related to bringing about changes in teaching and learning.’

Pedagogical leadership, where positional leaders model and encourage collaboration and provide opportunities for others to take on leadership roles, is important to the development of PLCs. DuFour (2006) also cites the advocacy and attention of effective leaders as crucial to meeting the challenges of implementing PLC concepts. Leaders, they say, have an explicit role in driving change but at the same time support schools to develop as self directed, autonomous teams characterised by shared decision making. Where schools achieve this autonomy they become less dependent on an individual leader and are more able to sustain the PLC culture despite changes in leadership.

Supportive leadership was identified by many NTAGQTP groups as essential to sustaining PLCs. ‘The success of PLCs hinge on leadership—without it, opportunities to discuss student work and reflect on classroom practice fail to happen. PLCs are too important to be left to chance’ (Danielle Little, NT Christian Schools Association). Others linked leadership with the provision of structural conditions. Centralian College acknowledged the importance of the leadership team in providing time for the PLC to meet and talk, as did the Central Australian Special Education program which recognised that by providing time within the school day, leaders were acknowledging that they valued their special education staff.

Learning from each other and valuing each other’s strengths was identified by NT PLCs as an important social condition, as were partnerships with DEET divisions and inter-school networks. Many NT groups also saw the funding provided by NTAGQTP as an important structural condition, giving the PLC initiative legitimacy, authority and credibility. Teachers saw the NTAGQTP activity as a ‘funded, supported program that would give them a voice’ (Kormilda College).
**Action Orientation**

Professional Learning Communities experience success when they identify a specific learning need and focus on improving outcomes in a way that can be measured and evaluated. A focus on outcomes rather than intentions (DuFour 2006) gives the PLC direction and guides collegial interaction. As PLCs address the questions: what is it we want our students to learn and how can we best support that learning, they engage in an action learning process.

DuFour et al (2006) describe this as *learning by doing*. This 'develops a deeper and more profound knowledge and greater commitment than learning by reading, planning or thinking.' They suggest a cyclic approach involving gathering evidence, developing strategies and ideas, implementing these strategies, analysing their impact and applying new knowledge to the next cycle of continuous improvement.

Sergiovanni (1996) in Hord, (1997) suggested that for classrooms to become communities of learning, caring, and inquiring there must be a commitment to inquiry. ‘If our aim is to help students become lifelong learners by cultivating a spirit of inquiry and the capacity for inquiry, then we must provide the same conditions for teachers.’ Teachers who work together to achieve continuous improvement through self-evaluation and enquiry engage in a powerful form of professional learning (Jolly, 2005).

A key aspect of working together is engagement in professional dialogue as teachers discuss student learning, reflect on teaching strategies and act as critical friends. Graham’s (2007) article discusses the role of conversation, contention and commitment in the PLC. Conversation, he says, must be purposeful, with an underlying goal relating to teaching and learning. Such conversations empower teachers to take responsibility for decision making within the school. Leaders have a role in modelling purposeful conversations by actively engaging others in dialogue focused around teaching and learning.

Active learning, in which teachers try new strategies in their classroom, observe colleagues or open their classrooms to others, encourages reflective practice with colleagues acting as critical friends. Reflection and feedback through professional dialogue form an essential part of teacher learning.

In the NT an action orientation was central to most AGQTP groups. One group reported this model was very important, as teachers were encouraged to try new strategies and to transfer learning from one teaching context to another. They found this model of PL relevant and engaging. Critical partners also played a significant role with this PLC, encouraging individuals to be honest and realistic in reflecting on their teaching. The NTCSA group found that the role of leader facilitators was crucial to encouraging reflective dialogue, keeping the groups, located in seven schools across the Territory, focused and actively engaged.

**Reflection and Evaluation**

While reflection and evaluation are implicit in the previous six areas, it is also useful to explicitly consider the role of and forms of evaluation used by PLCs to review practice, determine directions and reflect on their effectiveness as a PLC. From the outset of the PLC journey, it is important to articulate the goals of professional learning and describe how attainment of these goals will be documented. Bolam et al (2005) suggest that the effectiveness of a PLC should be judged on three criteria: the impact on student learning, impact on professional learning, performance and staff morale and thirdly on the operational performance of the PLC.

To be most effective, information should be gathered at all stages, from the planning stages through to implementation, follow-up, and institutionalisation (Guskey 1999). ‘Clear, focused goals and well-designed evaluation not only informs and contributes to the knowledge base of our field, it also empowers educators as they reflect on ways to improve their work, plan and implement effective staff development, and observe the differences that this professional learning makes in their practice and in student outcomes’ (Sparks 2002b).

DuFour et al (2006) states that PLC teams are successful when they clearly state what they want to achieve and how they will measure their progress and work together to establish goals, collect and analyse data and monitor and adjust their actions. They emphasise the need to address the question
‘how will we know our students are achieving this goal’ for every goal they establish. Goal setting, they say, should not just be about responding to perceived problems, but should also include ‘stretch’ goals. Where attainable goals document incremental progress and build momentum and can be achieved in the short term, stretch goals are more ambitious—they inspire, and stimulate creativity and innovation. By having both types of goal in place PLCs don’t just ask how good do we have to be rather than how good can we be?

Peter Senge, in an interview with Dennis Sparks (2001) also referred to a need to think beyond the problem solving approach to professional learning as this ‘diverts our attention from a far more important activity, which is creating the new…directing our energies into bringing things into reality that we really care about…when we’re solving problems, we’re trying to get rid of things we don’t want. When we’re creating, we are bringing into reality things that are valued by us.’

Kolb’s Experiential Learning Cycle (cited in Connors, 2005) provides a useful framework for PLCs to adopt in reflecting and evaluating. As PLCs experience, share, process, generalise and apply learning they focus on addressing the questions: What? So what? Now what? Eyler & Giles, also cited in Connors (2005) describe reflection as having four important elements—that it should be continuous, connected, challenging and contextualised.

In the NT, the importance of critical reflection was highlighted, along with the role of colleagues as critical partners, reinforcing Stoll’s (2006) assertion that it is important to nurture people who can act as critical friends, providing feedback, support and encouragement. Remote NT schools, where community partnerships are a key element of PLCs, also indicated the importance of Learning Together sessions for the opportunities they provide to reflect on learning.

Kormilda College echoed the second of Bolam’s 3 criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of a PLC, in noting the significant impact that their PLC was having on the model of professional development, in particular the allocation of funding, in the school.

For further information about the 2007 NTAGQTP Building Learning Communities activities, please refer to Part 2 - the case studies.
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