



Collaborative Learning Communities

A practical guide to creating a self-directed
learning experience for teachers

ONTARIO ENGLISH
Catholic
Teachers
ASSOCIATION

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The most valuable professional development is embedded in the ongoing life of school.

– For the Love of Learning, Royal Commission on Learning, Vol. III

Introduction

Teaching is a profession that relies on a lifelong pursuit of knowledge and expertise. Often this pursuit is done in the isolation of the individual teacher's classroom experience. Increasingly, teachers are finding that an opportunity to build knowledge and expertise collectively is a more rewarding experience. Collaborative learning communities provide the opportunity for teachers to meet in groups to discuss mutual interests and concerns about teaching and learning. Meeting in a community of learners often provides participants with the confidence to inquire into their practice and others to improvise, and innovate based on best research, and share their findings with their similarly interested colleagues.

This resource was developed to assist teachers who are interested in establishing collaborative learning communities for their own professional learning. Each section provides specific guidance on the stages of developing a collaborative learning community. The adjoining appendices provide projects and resources for the group.

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Defining a Collaborative Learning Community (CLC)

A Collaborative Learning Community (CLC) or Professional Learning Community (PLC) is a working group of individuals who come together to create a self-directed professional learning experience. The group collaboratively envisions, plans and undertakes action research. For each project, the group records, analyzes and shares data based on focused inquiry into a specific question or topic of mutual interest.

The focused inquiry is constructed upon a clearly-articulated question that guides the work of the group. Explorations and discoveries during the working period of the CLC will likely lead to new and/or extended questions that may become the starting point of a subsequent CLC. However, the primary objective of the CLC must be to address the question upon which the work is founded.

CLCs may be formally supported by a school, board, parent council, federation or government initiative. In this case, release time or funding may be provided. CLCs may also evolve from graduate studies by practitioners or the independent interest of colleagues who undertake the creation of a CLC without financial support. A CLC is defined by its objective and implementation, regardless of the status of funding.

Participation in a CLC

Participation in a CLC is open to anyone who shares the topic of interest. While successful CLCs are comprised of people with a common interest, a diversity of perspective enriches the CLC experience by facilitating the exploration of multiple viewpoints around the question. Effective functioning of a CLC requires participants to be receptive to new ideas and eager to think beyond their current experience or understanding to develop valuable professional learning. The results of the inquiry may differ greatly from the initial hypotheses or prior understandings of the group. It is important for participants to recognize that both positive and negative surprise findings may emerge from the inquiry – all of which will contribute to the professional learning of participants.

The CLC provides the opportunity for participants to engage in professional development that is targeted to their professional needs and interests. Since participants generally come together within a school or family of schools or within an online environment, groups have the flexibility to organize face-to-face or online meetings that accommodate busy schedules. Inquiry is embedded in the daily practice of participants, allowing authentic and meaningful inquiry.

Understanding the Process

The theoretical process of creating a CLC is simple, following a straight-forward plan that will be outlined clearly in this section.

For a funded CLC, the planning process will be undertaken for two purposes: to develop a purposeful and carefully-constructed plan of inquiry and to secure necessary approvals from the funding organization. Submission requirements to the funding organization will vary and may include timelines, expense projections, consent forms, etc. Participants are responsible for accessing and meeting these requirements as per the terms established by the funding organization.

An independent CLC should also undertake the same purposeful and careful planning as a funded project. Consultation with the school board may be required in the case of both funded and independent CLCs in order to meet any legal and ethical requirements of using student information, observations and/or data for research purposes.

Appendix A, CLC Process Checklist, will be useful for group members to consider as they articulate the process for the CLC.

CREATING THE VISION

The vision for a CLC is developed from conversations and questions that are shared by colleagues with a sincere desire to improve teaching and learning. These conversations often begin informally in staff rooms or over coffee, with phrases such as I wonder, What if, and How might. They are relevant to the practice of the participants, exploring prior understandings or new understandings that are not yet clearly defined. Conversations and questions that lead to the development of a vision for a CLC engage the interest of participants. They create a feeling of excitement because they connect to “an issue that the group has the ability and authority to influence and control” (Sagor, 1992), focusing a lens on the potential for growth, change and development. It is the energy, enthusiasm and excitement that are evoked during these conversations that will sustain the CLC when the work of the research peaks.

ARTICULATING THE QUESTION

Articulating the question can be the most challenging step in the process of planning and implementing a CLC. The question sets the objective for inquiry, establishes certain parameters for action and serves as an ongoing checkpoint to ensure the group remains on track.

Prior to determining the question, participants should ask themselves the following:

- Do we have a clear objective for asking this question? What do we want to know?
- Do we have a rationale for asking this question? Why is this inquiry important?
- Is this question relevant to our practice? How will answering this question make a difference in teaching and learning?
- Do we have the prior knowledge we need to undertake the research into this question? What resources will increase/support our knowledge base?
- Is our question realistic? How will we collect data to address our question? How will our inquiry enable us to implement change?
- Is there a timeline or criteria to signal that our inquiry is complete? What framework will we use to assess our work?

Remember that the style of question impacts the results of the inquiry. For example, “Does time to talk in the classroom impact reading scores for Grade 1 students?” brings the scope of the project to determining a yes/no answer, while “How might time to talk in the classroom impact reading scores for Grade 1 students?” opens the door to a deeper understanding of the issue and multiple implications. What is your objective? Which of these two question styles would best facilitate meeting that objective?

Appendix B, CLC Self-Reflection to Determine Possible Topics, may be useful for choosing topics that are of interest and relevant to the group.

ACTION

The action portion of the project includes collecting, analyzing and sharing the data.

Use backward design to set up timelines. What resources will you need to access?

What is your plan to gather the data? Who else needs to be involved? Who else needs to be involved? How? How will you monitor and evaluate progress?

Appendix C, Organizational Tips, for creating a CLC

Even groups made up of colleagues or friends who know each other well, need strategies that ensure everyone’s voice is honoured and that ideas are exchanged and acted upon.

Appendix D, Strategies for Facilitating Group Discussion, to ensure multiple viewpoints are considered before undertaking the project.

The first step is to decide what data you need to collect to answer your question.

Will you observe students as they work? Will you review and analyze student work?

Will you conference with students one-on-one or in small groups? Will you survey students and/or parents? Will you keep a journal of your own reactions, concerns, “ah-ha” moments? Plan the actions that will provide the data you need to address your question.

The action plan may benefit from consideration of **SMART goals** which are jointly developed and clear directions/suggestions for each member of the team:

Specific

- Well defined
- Clear to anyone that has a basic knowledge of the project

Measurable

- Know if the goal is obtainable the completion date achievable
- Know when it has been achieved

Agreed Upon

- Agreement with all the group members on what the goals should be

Realistic

- Within the availability of resources, knowledge and time

Time Based

- Enough time to achieve the goal
- Not too much time, which can affect project performance

Appendix E – Action Plan

Collecting and Recording the Data

The type of data you collect and the manner of data collection will necessarily relate back to your question. Referring back to our earlier example of the connection between time to talk and the impact on Grade 1 reading scores, the yes/no question may require simple observation of students as they talk and recording of subsequent reading scores at regular intervals. A correlation might then be made between the amount of time given to students to talk and the subsequent reading scores. The open-ended “how might” question may require audio recording of student conversations to determine “how” the students were using talk and how that specific talk might be impacting reading scores.

The means of recording data must also be considered. Anecdotal notes and observations are easy to implement. Audio or video recordings provide much more detail, but are very time consuming to review and analyze. Photos and artifacts (student work) can provide valuable evidence for your findings. Record the data in a consistent and organized manner. All data collection should be labeled and dated. Will you use only edited work or also first drafts? Will you use examples of both formative work and culminating tasks? The key is to remain consistent.

Appendix F – Data Gathering, lists various forms of data collecting

Schedule G – Collecting Data

Analyzing the Data

There are many methods (electronic and manual) to analyze data. The most straightforward is to look for patterns in the data that represent recurring themes, and then look for common themes among the data collection of all participants. Printing out or opening copies of notes and observations and physically or electronically moving them into separate folders for each theme (Bodgan & Biklen, 2003) provides participants with a collection of well-organized data that is easy to share.

Data analysis is often the most interesting and rewarding part of the project as participants find unexpected patterns or those that affirm or contradict prior understandings or hypotheses. The analysis of the data provides evidence for recommendations that participants will share to support change to current practice.

Sharing the Data

Shulman (1993) noted "... Scholarship entails an artifact, a product, some form of community property that can be shared, discussed, critiqued, exchanged, built upon" (p. 7). A CLC that collects and analyzes data without sharing its findings diminishes the value of the scholarly effort that has been put into the work.

Appendix H – Sample Reporting Format

Schools and boards of education welcome the availability of relevant and authentic data that reflects the board community. Education conferences such as OECTA's annual Beginning Teachers Conference or bi-annual Common Good Conference as well as ministry research forums encourage participation from teachers whose data is grounded in current field experience. In addition, peer-reviewed and less formal journals invite contributions of new and innovative practice.

Whether you choose to share your work at an OECTA or board professional development workshop, education conference, or in a journal, the true value of the time and effort dedicated to the work of the CLC is in the sharing. Colleagues are interested in relevant, authentic findings that emanate from the action research of experienced teachers in the classroom.

1. Creating a Vision

- Engage in open conversation with colleagues about issues that are relevant to your practice.
- Invite colleagues to join you in an inquiry into the issue.
- Investigate the potential for a funded CLC.
- Agree to establish a CLC (either funded or non-funded).

2. Articulating the Question

Draft an initial question to frame the work of your CLC.

Consider the following questions:

- Do we have a clear objective in asking this question? What do we want to know?
- Do we have a rationale for asking this question? Why is this inquiry important?
- Is this question relevant to our practice? How will answering this question make a difference in teaching and learning?
- Do we have the prior knowledge we need to undertake the research of this question? What resources will increase/support our knowledge base?
- Is our question realistic? How will we collect data to address our question? How will our inquiry enable us to impact change?
- Is there a timeline or criteria to signal that our questioning is complete? What framework will we use to assess our work?

Develop a formal question to guide your CLC.

Keep the question at the forefront of your work by posting it on your blog or posting a hard copy in bold print in your meeting space.

3. Action

- Plan the actions that you will undertake to facilitate the collection of the data you need to address your question.
- Choose a data collection method that is most appropriate to your actions (anecdotal observations, field notes, audio/video recordings, photos, artifacts and assessments of student work, student conferences, surveys, etc.).
- Ensure data and artifacts are labeled and dated. Back up any electronic files and take photos of artifacts.
- Keep accurate minutes and take photos of your meetings.
- Analyze your data by looking for patterns and themes.
- Sort your data into files or folders to provide evidence for your findings.
- Reflect on your experience.

4. Sharing data

- Share your data with colleagues and the greater education community.
- Consider sharing through meeting presentations, workshops, or conferences.
- Publish your work in a journal, on a website or a [teachertube.com](https://www.teachertube.com) video upload.
- Start thinking about the next CLC you will undertake.

Things I am concerned about:

Things I would like to try:

Things I think I could improve upon:

Things I want to learn more about:

- Create a blog or web folder to communicate with the group, and post meeting times, photographs of artifacts and other CLC documents. Individual group members may choose to store hard copies or maintain a CLC binder.
- Be sure to back up all electronic data storage.
- Delegate responsibility fairly among group members.
- Assign one person to take responsibility for compliance with funding regulations and submissions.
- Establish a meeting space that allows the CLC to engage in focused conversation without distractions. Choose a space that is bright and airy, reflecting an atmosphere of organization and purpose.
- Have a “Meeting Kit” with essential items (highlighters, sticky notes, a box to hold artifacts, camera to create a photo record of artifacts and meetings, etc.).
- Plan an agenda for each meeting and ensure that detailed notes (minutes) of the discussion are distributed and posted to the web folder or blog.
- Keep school administration and other interested stakeholders up to date on the progress of your inquiry.
- Understand that even the best organized CLCs may encounter hurdles. Focus on the objective. Engage in targeted problem-solving sessions to address the challenges, and don’t hesitate to ask for support from others who are experienced with working in CLCs.

Even groups made of colleagues or friends who know each other well need strategies that ensure everyone's voice is heard and that ideas are exchanged and acted upon.

Strategy Cards

This strategy is a quick way for members to share information from their readings or other ideas that have arisen in their practice.

1. Each member comes with a strategy(ies) or ideas on a 3 x 5 card.
2. Members share their cards with the group.
3. One or two members paraphrase the information.
4. Cards become part of the ongoing documentation of learning.

3-2-1

Activates and brings information forward into the present. Helpful for building coherence and continuity to the CLC sessions.

1. Individuals privately record three things they remember from the last time together, two questions they have about their work, and one insight relative to their work.
2. Share and be prepared to identify themes or commonalities between the members' points.

Sort Cards

1. Each member generates the following:
 - Knowledge or feelings they have about a topic the group is about to address
 - Standards or values that should drive a piece of work.
 - Examples of successful strategies in this area.
2. Share, categorize, label categories and reflect on what they indicate and how this information informs you about how to proceed?

**Strategies are adapted from the OECTA Joint Project with the Center for Adaptive Schools on Dialogue, An Introduction, 2009.*

Develop an action plan for next steps with jointly developed and clear directions/ suggestions for each member of the team. Update this action at each meeting. How will you monitor and evaluate progress?

ACTION PLAN			
Name of Project: _____			
Date: _____			
Goals	Timelines	Actions	Who

Surveys

Questionnaire

Interviews

Observations

Case studies

Journals, logs

Assessment of student work

Documentation

Photographs

The research for most CLC's will take place in the classroom and rely on teacher observation.

- Keeping a log is generally the most effective way to collect data
- Organize data in ways that make sense to you
- Code the results, to ensure confidentiality
- Look for patterns and anomalies

Log of Classroom Observations

<p>Kindergarten Log for January 25, 1:00 – 2:00 p.m.</p> <p>Heading: Include the date of the experience and the time spent (1:00 p.m. – 1:15 p.m.). Write the log the day of the experience to keep the reflections accurate.</p>		
<p>Sequence of Events: Make a list of what happens; even events that seem insignificant at the time.</p>	<p>Significant Episodes: Elaboration of One or Two Significant Episodes: Select the events or sequence of events that are significant to you. Use quotes from what learners or others say or do; describe the context such as the lesson and the environment. Avoid qualifiers referring to your own feelings or thoughts. Keep the observations judgment free.</p>	<p>Analysis of Episodes: In analyzing the episodes, try to identify what did or didn't work. Determine whether the episode confirms or disputes your understanding about the problem or the actions that should be taken. Often the analysis includes questions that arise out of the observations. Often these questions need to be addressed by going back and looking at the research literature in a specific area.</p>

Example of an Observation Log

<p>Events: Children are engaged at the centres.</p> <p>ECE reads with a small group at the reading centre.</p> <p>Teacher/researcher focuses on the activity at the block centre.</p>	<p>Episode: Joseph, Connor, Ava and Audrey are playing in the block centre. I joined the group but they were too engrossed in their play and did not pay attention to me. Connor built a high tower of blocks. Joseph knocked them down and laughed as he did. Connor became upset. I directed Joseph to help rebuild the tower but he refused and sat down in the farthest corner of the block centre. I sat with Connor and helped him rebuild his tower. Once Joseph had calmed down, I went and talked to him about his actions. He said he did not want to talk to me. After some cajoling, I involved him in building a tower like Connor's.</p>	<p>Analysis: Joseph is having difficulty regulating his emotions. He was impulsive and may have actually been trying to join Connor in play but didn't know how to approach in a co-operative manner. He is one of the younger children in the class, is an only child, and did not go to preschool or daycare. He may not have developed the interpersonal skills for joining in play with others.</p>
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Components for an Action Research/CLC Report

The following should be included as the components/headers in your Action Research/CLC Report:

- Research question and brief rationale for selection: (Why this? Why now? What drew you?)
- Background Information (setting, population, school, class, etc.)
- Actions undertaken to address the question (describe meeting agenda, tasks, etc.)
- Instruments (1 or 2) used to collect data (student work, survey, questionnaire)
- Descriptive account or narrative of what happened in the project (struggles, changes in thinking or in action that each member has gone through, etc.)
- Literature Review: three to four articles would be sufficient; one or two per CLC member
- Organization, interpretation and/or analysis of the data collected
- Conclusion (What did I learn?), recommendations, suggestions for future actions for self and others
- Connections to educational research (could be included in Data Interpretation or Conclusion, if more suitable)
- Other materials (pictures of team collaborating, student work samples etc.)

Remember, you are telling your story. You can organize chronologically, by theme, by data source, etc. The report should be about five to seven pages in length.

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York-Barr, J., Sommers, W. & Ghere, G. (2001). *Reflective Practice to Improve Schools*. Corwin Press.

Additional Resources

Teaching colleagues, school administrators and school board consultants are valuable resource contacts to support your CLC and answer your questions.

The Ontario College of Teachers has an extensive online library of resources.

Go to www.oct.ca/library/?lang=en-CA

Log in to the Members Section, then scroll down to the library catalogues search.

A search using the phrase Professional Learning Communities will provide a list of over 1700 resources.

The following documents provide a quick source of additional information.

Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (2007). Professional Learning Communities:

A Model for Ontario Schools.

www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/research/PLC.pdf

Ontario Ministry of Education (2010). *Promoting Collaborative Learning Cultures:*

Putting the Promise into Practice.

www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/leadership/IdeasIntoActionSpring.pdf

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