

## **Building a Professional Learning Community: How to Get Started**

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### **Abstract**

Teachers' Professional Learning Community (PLC) has developed its values in not only teachers' teaching but students' learning. Although many experts and educators agree that the practice of teachers' Professional Learning Communities has brought several benefits for teachers' teaching; however, senior high schools in Taiwan still develop a relatively slow schedule for the promotion of PLCs, compared to those in primary and secondary schools. This study aims at exploring the current situation of PLCs in senior high school settings, and more specifically, focuses on the triggers, or the initiators, for the formation of a PLC. Qualitative method was selected in the research, where the founder and a newcomer of the PLC were interviewed. The result suggests a pattern for the formation of a PLC in senior high school setting.

Key words: Professional Learning Community, teacher development, high school

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## 1. Introduction

Attention to the teachers' professional development nowadays has been well recognized in the past decades. The Holmes Group proposed the idea of Professional Development School in the mid-1980s, urging for teachers' preparation, and regarding teachers as a group of professionals. They believed that professional development is a key factor, which led to the success of students' learning. Meanwhile, quite a few research concerning this issue (Rosenholz, 1989) indicated that "the organization of *effective schools* have regarded the development of professionally enriching work groups as a major facilitator of commitment and effort with the potential to improve student learning (Louis & Mark, 1998, p.533)." In other words, teachers' professional development played crucial roles in students' learning (Huang, 2014; Ting, 2012).

Later, in the mid 1990s, many schools in the United States underwent school reforms, where they managed to "professionalize the work environment of teachers (Louis & Mark, 1998)." They, under the policy of the school reforms, sought ways and used teachers' professional networks to support teaching. With professional networks or collaboration, teachers continuously sharpened their pedagogy and teaching skills so as to improve the students' learning outcomes. Later, the notion of the teachers' professional learning community (PLC) was on the horizon.

Since developing PLCs was crucial for effective school to hold considerable comprise for capacity building for sustainable improvement worldwide (Stoll, Bolam, , McMahan, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006), public senior high schools in Taiwan, however, still developed a relatively slow schedule for the practice of PLCs. Therefore, in this current study, the researcher would like to find out the real situation of PLCs carried out in a senior high school, and further to investigate what factors might result in the initiation of a PLC in the senior high school setting. In the following were the research questions of this study.

1. What does a PLC mean to the participated teachers?
2. What is required for high schools in order to promote the triggers to a Professional Learning community? What are the "initiators" to a PLC from a school's perspectives?
3. What factors might account for high school teachers' participation in a PLC? What makes those teachers willing to join a PLC?
4. What makes the PLC sustainable? What factor(s) make the teachers, after several meetings, willing to stay in the PLC?

In order to answer the research questions above, such qualitative research method as interview was employed in order to elicit more in-dept information concerning the issue.

## 2. Definition and Characteristics of Professional Learning Community

Professional learning community (PLC) referred to teachers' working in groups, normally four to six people, embarking on their interested topics for students' learning (Ting, 2012). It helped facilitate teacher collaboration, and effectively change or improve the way of teachers' isolation. Kruse, Louis, and Bryk (1995) defined professional learning community as a group of teachers whose focus was mainly on students' learning through the culture for collaboration (cited by Roberts and Pruitt, 2009). Kruse et al categorized the features of professional learning community into five parts: (1) reflective dialogues, (2) focus on students learning, (3) interaction among teacher colleagues, (4) collaboration, and (5) shared values and norms. *Reflective dialogues* were those conversations where teachers highlighted their teaching behaviors and students' learning outcomes so as to bring themselves improvement after reflective discussions. *Focus on students learning* was described as teachers' conversations that emphasized on curriculum, teaching materials, and students' learning outcomes. *Interaction among colleagues* welcomed teachers' professional discussion, and encouraged a close collegial bond, or relationship, among teachers. *Collaboration* was characterized as a mutual cooperative norm or culture where teachers shared instructional ideas in order to better the pedagogical behaviors. *Shared values and norms* suggested a climate of partnership where teachers marched toward the same goals. Likewise, Stoll and his colleagues (2006) also summarized PLC into five key characteristics or features, shown in Table 1, which they believed were "intertwined, and operating together (p 226)," and furthermore they proved three more to the features: mutual trust, respect and support among staff members; inclusive membership, and openness, networks and partnerships (Stoll et al, 2006, p227).

Besides, DuFour (2004) proposed three big ideas to elaborate the core principles of professional learning community: (1) ensuring that students learn, (2) a culture of collaboration, and (3) a focus on results. Unlike the numerous characteristics with partly overlapping features in other studies, these three big ideas depicted distinct and cardinal features of PLC, marking equivalent importance.

Table 1. Characteristics of Professional Learning Community

Characteristics	Kruse et al, 1995	Stoll et al, 2006	Dufour, 2004
Reflective dialogues	⊙	⊙	
Focus on Ss learning	⊙		⊙
Interaction among Ts	⊙		
Collaboration	⊙	⊙	⊙
Shared visions	⊙	⊙	
Collective responsibility		⊙	
Group/individual learning		⊙	
Focus on results			⊙

First of all, Dufour claimed that education should not merely “ensure that students are taught, but to ensure that they *learn*.” The shift from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning successfully drew more teachers’ attention, and many efforts were hence made in accordance with the same direction. He believed that with professional learning communities, teachers became aware of the “incongruity” between teachers’ original focus on teaching and the focal points on the students’ learning. Therefore, techniques like *timely, and directive intervention*, rather than passive remediation, were employed in order to ensure that students *learn*. Second, *a culture of collaboration* suggested the climate with teachers’ “congeniality” and “group camaraderie.” Dufour indicated that a PLC was a “systematic process in which teachers worked together to analyze and improve their classroom practice.” This idea helped teachers avoid working in isolation any longer, and get started to collaborate for school improvement. Teachers in PLC were expected to develop common formative assessments, or curriculum-oriented programs, and were also expected to make their conversations public. According to Dufour, teachers normally refusing to work together often made the excuses like this, “We just can’t find the time.” Barth (1991), however, critically responded to the answer by saying that teachers sometimes needed to accept that they were the problem. The reason for teachers to remain isolation was that teachers found it safer to than and preferable to working together. Therefore, teachers needed to be more aware that they cannot use the “one teaching technique for all” to teach other students in the fast-changing society, and it would be better to find ways *collaboratively* to face major challenges for improvement. Third, Dufour indicated that schools and teachers typically suffered from the DRIP syndrome (Data Rich but Information Poor), and therefore the result-oriented PLCs enabled teachers to turn data into useful and relevant information for staff, and also make them a solid ground for a basis of comparison.

### 3. Methodology

This section began with a description of two research sites, the principals' leadership style and the participants, some of whom were the establisher of the PLC, and the others were the newcomers. Then it was followed by the data collection procedure and data analysis. The methodological approach to this study consisted of mainly quantitative data, since the researcher aimed to find out more about the initiators to a PLC, as interviews are more flexible when elicit in-dept information (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007).

#### 3.1 Research Site and School Culture

The study was conducted at two high schools in urban area of Taipei City: one high school (pseudonym as Lake School of commerce), and one vocational high school (pseudonym as Hilltop High School). In the following the researcher provided the description and school cultures of both schools.

##### 3.1.1 Lake High School of Commerce

This vocational high school was a commerce-oriented school, and it offered six specialized programs (business management, accounting, international trade, data processing, advertisement design, and applied foreign language) with an enrollment of 2718 students. The teaching faculty of the school was approximately 356 people, and many had spent the majority of their teaching careers at the school.

The school culture was positively correlated with the principals' leadership (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990; Marks & Printy, 2003). The *distributed leadership* of the principal had something to do with the onset of the PLC. The principal was in her early 50s, with her master degree in Education Administration at Taipei Municipal College of Education. She had been a commissioner, secretary, supervisor, and later division director at the Bureau of Education of the Taipei City Government. She was assigned as the principal to the very high school of commerce in 2007. She was the first female principal, and in additional, was the only one to have a second term in the school history. Her strategies of management were "students as center, teaching as core, teamwork as power, and high quality as goal." She successfully renovated the school buildings and campus in her early years at this school due to her strong personal charisma asking for additional resources from the Bureau of education of the Taipei City Government and such non-profit organizations as Rotary International.

In the second term of her tenure in this school, she started to pay attention to the accountability of students' performance. For instance, she raised a disputed issue to cancel a famous activity in the history of the school—the Hunted House, which was designed by the advertisement department students in their junior years. She argued that the Hunting House took too much time for the students, who should be devoted more to their studies rather than the preparation for just a two-day

activity. With her resolute decision-making, the academic performance of the students in the advertisement department hence rocketed. Therefore, the principal's *instructional leadership* was believed to make her focus on the "technical core" of teaching (Elmore, 2000).

In the early 2010s, the principal started to promote the formation of the teachers' professional learning communities, yet most of the teachers felt to hold back at that time. Not until the early 2013 did a teacher, Ms. Kuo, volunteer to apply for the establishment of the first PLC in the school. This firstly formed PLC in the school was made up of about seven teachers as regular members, and still some other "come and go" members. The PLC drew teachers' attention to the students' moral lessons, and teachers' classroom management skills. The members were teachers from different teaching fields: Chinese, Chemistry, Design, English, Business Management, Mathematics, and Data Processing.

### 3.1.2 Hilltop Senior High School

Hilltop senior high school was transformed from Hilltop junior high school in 1994 in order to meet the need of offering more high school programs at that time. It was located in a hilltop surrounded by elegant mountain natural area in Taipei City. It had a total of 49 classes with more than 2000 students and approximately 128 teachers at present. Nine programs were offered, including Chinese, English, Math, Social Science, and so forth.

Hilltop senior high school was characterized as its pioneering second language training. It made French as its required course in freshmen program, asking all the students to take French as the second language. The students were encouraged to speak fluently in French so as to promote international exchange programs with French high schools.

The present principal, Mr. Wang, was the fourth principals of the senior high school. His leadership style referred to six domains. First, *equality*—hoping that no child was left behind; second, *collaboration*—team work was always emphasized; third, *vision*—school affairs need to be arranged with vision; fourth, *taking challenges*—staff were encouraged to take challenges; fifth, *promoting teachers' professional development*; and sixth, *crisis management*—school focused on the crisis prevention and management. He was in his second year when the interview took place. As mentioned above, Principal Wang encouraged teachers' professional networks. And luckily, Hilltop senior high school had its history in promoting teachers' professional learning communities, and meanwhile, the teachers there were somehow used to the collaborative and sharing atmosphere.

The school culture toward teachers' professional community was highly cultivated. Many teachers made use of their lunch break, about 40 minutes, to join PLCs. Those teachers who participated in PLCs often joined two or three ones. They brought their lunch boxes to the assigned location during the lunch hours, and enjoyed their time. At present, there were 15 PLCs in Hilltop Senior high schools, including 6 subject-oriented and 9 cross-subject ones. Unlike PLCs in Lake High school of Commerce, the PLCs in Hilltop Senior High School were flourishing and rather

stable in the development.

### 3.2 Participants of the Study

Totally seven teachers, including 3 newcomers and 4 leaders, in these two schools participated in the research. They were either founders or leaders of the PLC, or the newcomers to a PLC, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. The interviewees: Leaders and newcomers

Leader/Newcomer	Teacher	Year in teaching	Teaching Subject	School
Leader	Ms. Kuo	28 yrs	Chemistry	Lake High school of Commerce
Leader	Ms. Hsueh	15 yrs	Geography	Hilltop Senior High School
Leader	Ms. Chang	16 yrs	Technology	Hilltop Senior High School
Leader	Ms. Fang	16 yrs	Music	Hilltop Senior High School
Newcomers	Ms. Hung	5 yrs	Mathematics	Lake High school of Commerce
Newcomers	Mr. Zeng	15 yrs	Mathematics	Hilltop Senior High School
Newcomers	Mr. Tang	3 yrs	Chinese	Hilltop Senior High School

PLCs in Lake High School of Commerce were in the onset stage. Ms. Kuo was the founder of the first PLC. She was in her 28<sup>th</sup> year of the teaching career. Her strong passion for education and willing-to-help personality always made her enjoy a lot of trust and respect among colleagues. The other teacher in Lake High School of Commerce was a female young teacher who taught the subject of Mathematics—Ms. Hung, who had joined the PLC for no more than a semester (only four months) and was seen as a newcomer to the community.

On the contrary, the PLCs in Hilltop Senior High School were in its developing stage. The PLCs were facilitated by the school administration with a more hierarchical practice. The Experiment and Research Section (實研組) under Academic Affair Office (教務處) arranged the PLC affairs—it either assigned leaders or selected volunteers as the leaders to the PLCs. Two newcomers and three leaders of PLCs were interviewed in order to elaborate more in-dept response on the issue of teachers' professional learning communities.

### 3.3 Data Collection

The interviews took place during early January to early June, 2014. The interview in both schools was different. In Lake High School of Commerce, the researcher interviewed both teachers individually, but while consulting teachers in Hilltop Senior High School, the interview was conducted in a discussion group, where five participants were interviewed at the same time. The

interview questions were somewhat different for both leaders and newcomers. The questions for newcomers were to elicit more information about the workable or feasible enablers in order to trigger the onset of a PLC, while the inquiries for leaders aimed to understand how and for what purpose this PLC was established. Therefore, the interview questions for newcomers were as follows:

1. What impressed you most?
2. How long have you taken part in the PLC? How does this PLC work?
3. What are the objectives to the PLC? Why did you join the PLC?
4. What is the most significant factor for you to stay in the community?

As for the interview questions for leaders the researcher made her focus on different scope as follows:

1. What are the purposes for you to establish the PLC?
2. In order to give birth to the PLC, what do you need from the administrative offices?
3. Do you need any adjustments or changes during the running of the PLC?
4. Do you think that this PLC has any influence on the school practice? If so, what is the influence actually?)

#### **4. The Interview Data Presentation and Analysis**

This section documented the interviews with seven members of the PLC, four of whom were leaders, and three were newcomers. The interviews were tape-recorded. Later, the researcher transcribed the data verbatim for the data analysis.

##### **4.1 Interview with newcomers**

Newcomers of PLCs were not necessarily new to the schools. For instance, among our interviewees, Mr. Zeng who had 15 teaching experience was the newcomer to a PLC. While asking about the reason why they joined PLCs, these three newcomers all believed it was the *culture of sharing, the practicability, time, and the leaders* acted as the key factors for them to initiate the practice.

“What impressed me most (tone rising), I think it might be that everyone in the community *shared*....Actually, the teachers are the group of people who, most of the time, work independently. [So], with the members’ sharing [their idea or the way of teaching], I can recall what part I didn’t do well, and if I were to encounter the same situation again, what am I going to do? And I think *share among the members* is the most helpful part for me.”  
(Ms. Hung)



Similarly, Mr. Zeng reported the same idea; he believed it was an amazing thing to share what he knew to the members. He said,

“I am always thrilled to share something I know to others....I really love to share with the members and after the PLC meeting, I enjoyed the discussion with them.” (Mr. Zeng)

Mr. Tang with three-year teaching experience frankly expressed that *whether it was helpful* was the reasons why he would like to join PLCs.

“When I first selected which PLCs to join, the first thing came to my mind were time and what helpful ideas I can gain from the group....I think I learn a lot from the meetings, and the culture of sharing was really amazing.” (Mr. Tang)

Besides Mr. Zeng and Mr. Tang, Ms. Hung in Lake High School of Commerce, participating 93 % of the total meetings in the semester, felt that she learned a lot from the community, but she later expressed her reluctance to stay the community because she thought the focus of the community was only on a journal, which was too limited. Therefore, *interesting topics*, or *practicability* was the key.

“Actually I was planning to drop [the community] next semester because I think the community emphasizes only on this weekly journal, and I have made my student keep the journal for more than two years, so I think what I can learn from this part is pretty much limited.”

Obviously, Ms. Hung pointed out the problem that this community seemed no longer attractive to her, after 14 meetings concentrating on the same topic. The crisis raised and, apparently, the leader of the community, Ms. Kuo, had also been aware of that. In the last meeting of the semester, Ms. Kuo brought up the issue and invited all the members to freely talk about any adjustments that could be made for the next semester, and this open discussion allowed more teachers to contribute their ideas, and *this* made Ms. Hung stay.

“Yesterday, we just talked about different topics or directions for the next semester, so I think ...umm, I might...give it a shot again.”

This newcomer’s response was straightforward, though. She frankly expressed her unwillingness to stay in the community because of the same and repeating topic. However, she decided to stay because the topic was shifted to a different direction, which was contributed by all the members.

Therefore, the topic was one of the forces to *pull* the members, and meanwhile, the chances for the members to make their decisions also played a crucial role, to some extent.

When asked the question about what brought her to the community, these three newcomers unanimously expressed that it was all thanks to the PLC leaders. Ms. Hung further explained that the leaders were very “zealous” and it was hard for her to turn the invitation down at first. But she found out that she was joyfully bathed in the merry atmosphere to see so many teachers working *that* hard for their students. Besides, Mr. Tang also added “*the leader of PLCs was trying really hard to make it work, so I think I should participate in it.*” Therefore, the leader of PLCs, as the newcomers pointed out, was one of the key “initiators” for them to take part in the community. The characteristics of being persuasive and trustful were important as well.

#### 4.2 Interview with Leaders of PLCs

Four leaders of PLCs were interviewed in the study, where Ms. Kuo was from the Lake High School of Commerce, and the three others—Ms. Hsueh, Ms. Chang and Ms. Fang, from Hilltop High School. When asked what made them initiate the PLC, they believed the core value was their *sense of mission*—to make the school a better place to work, and *the principals’ leadership*. Ms. Chang said,

“What makes me want to be the leader? I think it is partly because of my administrative position, and partly owing to my willingness, I just feel like doing so.”

Ms. Hsueh shared it in the same way, where she believed leaders should do something to make the school a better place. She mentioned,

“What we do is to cultivate those teachers, and if they can teach better, we can attract more students.” (Ms. Hsueh)

Ms Kuo from the Lake High School of Commerce recalled that the idea to start the PLC was partly due to the encouragement and the inspiration from the Principal. She was pondering at that time that she might do something to make the first PLC work in our school. So two years ago, she expressed her will to be the leader and started to look for some resources.

“At the beginning, the principal after learning some school has establishing the workshop thought maybe we could have our own.” (Ms. Kuo)

Ms. Hsueh indicated that principal’s encouragement led to the formation of one of our PLCs. Because of principal’s support, we have some budget to make PLCs work better. Apart from the support of the principals, the assistance from administration was also the trigger to the onset of a

PLC. Take Lake High School of Commerce for example.

First of all, the PLC in Lake High School of Commerce was embedded in the workshop held by the Counseling Office (輔導室), the PLC started before the workshop started every Tuesday afternoon. To be more specific, the workshop was held at 13:00~14:00, and the PLC took place from 14:00 to 16:00 every Tuesday. The reason for doing so was that Kuo, instead of looking for the fresh-new members, could just invite the teachers who joined to workshop to stay and participate, and meanwhile, it was easier for the administrative officers to give the members shared meeting hours, leaving their Tuesday afternoon unoccupied.

The distributed leadership of the Principal was a key to the PLC. The principal and the leader of the PLC managed to promote a collective learning environment where individual teachers could have their personal ideas and practices shared (Day et al, 2011; Elmore, 2000). In the case study, the leader of PLC promoted a “platform” for teachers to exchange their ideas, and meanwhile empowered them to make decisions.

Hsu (2012) indicated that the onset of teachers’ PLCs can be catalyzed or triggered by school administrators or experts, and it would be better to make members take on the leaders’ role later. The case of Hilltop Senior High School was following the example. They assigned the administrators to be the leaders, and to initiate the PLCs. However, the case was different in Lake High School of Commerce, where Ms. Kuo was not the administrators, nor the experts. She was just a key person with passion for improving teachers’ growth and students’ learning.

## 5. Conclusion

These above findings focused on the motivations, or *initiators*, for teachers to join the professional learning communities. The motivations could be summarized into two main parts in this final paper, as shown in Figure 1. Intrinsic desire on the left hand part described a teacher personal motivation when deciding to take part in a Professional Learning Community. The second part referred to extrinsic motivation. To begin with, extrinsic conditions as depicted on the right part of the figure, such as friendly invitation, and the characteristics of the leaders of PLCs, the culture of sharing, or the support from the Principals (i.e., distributed leadership), played as the beginner trigger. In this paper, the key reason for Ms. Hung to participate in the PLC was mainly due to Ms. Kuo’s earnest invitation, and her trust on Ms. Kuo.

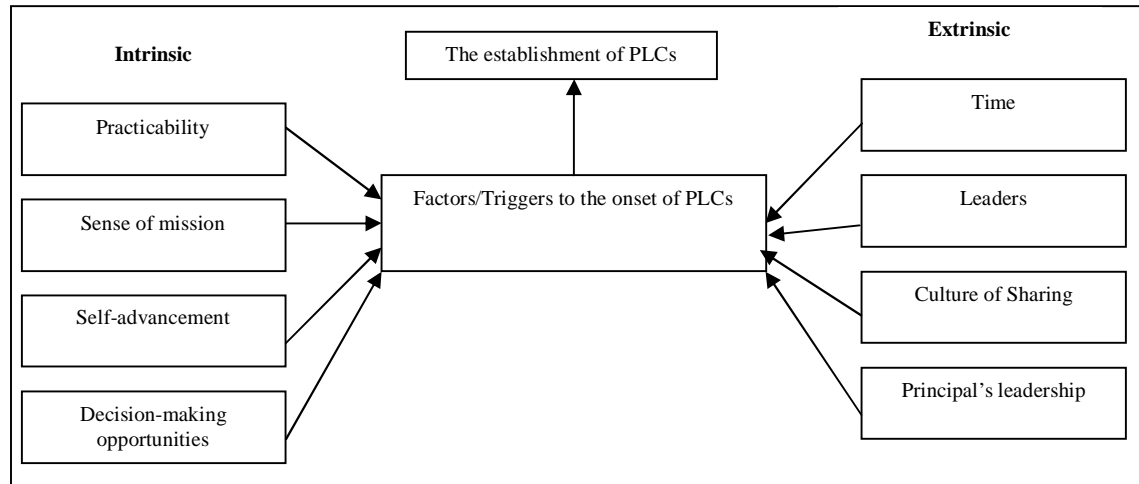


Figure 1. Motivations for teachers to join a PLC.

As for more intrinsic part of the motivation, the first reason to make newcomers join a PLC was due to the interesting topics or the practicability that PLC provided. Also, providing members with sufficient decision-making opportunities would be another key trigger for them to stay in the program. Most of the teachers used to working in their autonomy, and they enjoyed making their own decisions. If they were deprived of that, chances were they might very likely to drop the program.

Another core motivation of the triggers lay in the inner part in a teacher. It was more like *the desire to get advanced*, pushing individuals to seek further professional development. These drivers in teachers make them willing to find ways in solving their own challenging problems, and also enhance their possibilities to take part in PLCs. If the self-advancement desire of teachers were to reinforced, those teachers were more likely to share more in the future, and help them build up more successful experience. As for the leaders, their sense of mission played an important role as triggers of PLCs, and it was a solid motivation to help leaders endure difficulties and challenges.

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