



How a Fully Online Higher Education Professional Learning Community Works toward Student Success

by Julie A. Moser

A recent literature review on the topic of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) has indicated a need for guidelines regarding the design and implementation of online and hybrid PLCs. Recommendations that do exist are primarily related to traditional, face-to-face PLCs (Blitz, 2013). In an effort to address this guideline gap, a 2016 study explored processes of interaction as well as attitudes and beliefs among individuals participating in a fully online higher education PLC within the University System of New Hampshire. Known as the Online Reflective Practitioner Group, this online PLC was formed in 2013 to explore questions about how faculty in higher education can cultivate student success in online learning environments. Since its inception, the group has worked to enhance student success in online learning environments by sharing concerns, notable trends, and strategies for engaged instruction to improve learning experiences for students. This article explores the context, processes of interactions, and outcomes related to how this fully online PLC works to meet its goals.

Effectiveness and Ingredients for Success

Research has shown that PLCs enhance knowledge and impact in education (Andrews & Lewis, 2007). Changes in reported behavior among those engaged in PLCs include greater confidence,

enthusiasm for collaborative work, and an increased dedication to changing practice and attempting novel approaches (Cordingley, Bell, Rundell, & Evans, 2003). Professional learning communities have also been shown to improve students' academic and social achievement (Rungrojngarmcharoen, 2013). Other documented benefits include reduced isolation for staff, higher satisfaction rates and morale, and increased dedication to the mission and goals driving the PLC (Williamson & Education Partnerships, Inc., 2009). Participants in PLCs have identified other positive outcomes, such as having a safe environment for inquiry with peers to explore questions in a way where uncertainty is both valued and supported (Snow-Gerono, 2005).

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PLCs that have demonstrated improved practice and student achievement include video-based reflection (Allen, Pianta, Gregory, Mikami, & Lun, 2011; Brantlinger, Sherin, & Linsenmeier, 2011; Roth, Garnier, Chen, Lemmens, Schwille, & Wickler, 2011) and mentoring programs (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011), which have been shown to minimize feelings of isolation among early career professionals and are most successful when the programs are coordinated by individuals who are positive, pro-social, and professional and come from the same training background (Beltman, Mansfield, & Price, 2011).

Processes of Interaction

The Online Reflective Practitioner Group was initially facilitated by an instructional designer and faculty member at Plymouth State University (PSU), and participants are all adjunct instructors in higher education within the state of New Hampshire who primarily teach online courses or teach some online courses or who want to transition to online teaching environments. The group includes 10 instructors with varying levels of responsibility, ranging from adjunct instructor to full-time faculty.

The data collected during the study was analyzed using a grounded theory approach that included a constant comparative method, allowing gathered data to be compared with emerging categories, as outlined in *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design* (Creswell, 2007). A variety of data sources were collected for the study, including attitudinal surveys, transcripts from web-based meetings and online interaction, and participant interviews. Transcripts from web-based meetings, e-mail exchanges, and the online resource area were collected and organized along a timeline beginning six months prior to the study start date. Participant interviews were conducted during the final month of the project and focused “on how individuals experience the process” of

the online PLC as well as what the experience means to them (Creswell, 2007, p. 66). Attitudinal surveys provided an opportunity for individualized and anonymous feedback; the interview session was conducted using the same web-based technology as the monthly meetings. Attitudinal surveys, transcripts from web-based meetings and online interaction, and participant interviews were triangulated and coded through a qualitative process of initial, focused, axial, and theoretical coding. Qualitative data gathered throughout the study was an important aspect of this study as it was rooted in grounded theory, which seeks to understand phenomena through data analysis and then develop categories that may inform theory development. As a result, interview questions led to other avenues of inquiry about processes of interaction as well as attitudes and beliefs among the individuals who participate in this online PLC.

Surveys, transcripts, and interviews were analyzed first through an open coding process, which provided examples of categories of the phenomenon within the data as well as subcategories and any notable deviations from standard categories. Based on Charmaz (2014, p. 47), the following questions helped frame the open coding process and illuminated the following themes:

What is the data a study of? The data is a study of the context, processes of interaction, and outcomes of the Online Reflective Practitioner Group, which appears to be social constructivist in nature.

What does the data suggest? The data suggests that the group has a flexible framework rooted in social constructivist principles. There are also opportunities to study how the group's work translates to empirical evidence of enhanced student outcomes in classes and within the organizations where members teach and work. The data also indicates that participants have a strong desire to advance their personal practice and share best practices with the field of adult educators who teach within online learning environments.

From whose point of view? The perspectives in this study are restricted to the participants within the group who opted to participate in this study. All active members opted to participate in the study.

What theoretical categories emerge? Primary thematic categories that emerged during the open coding process included

- sharing with others to enhance student success in online environments,
- personal learning,
- the importance of community,
- processes of interaction as important and valued,
- advancing the field of practice and testing new approaches,
- technology as a tool for sharing.

Next, the data was analyzed using axial coding, which helped narrow down the initial open coding process to a major category (central phenomenon), categories of "conditions that influence the phenomenon" (causal conditions), as well as the context, intervening conditions, and consequences (Creswell, 2007, p. 67).

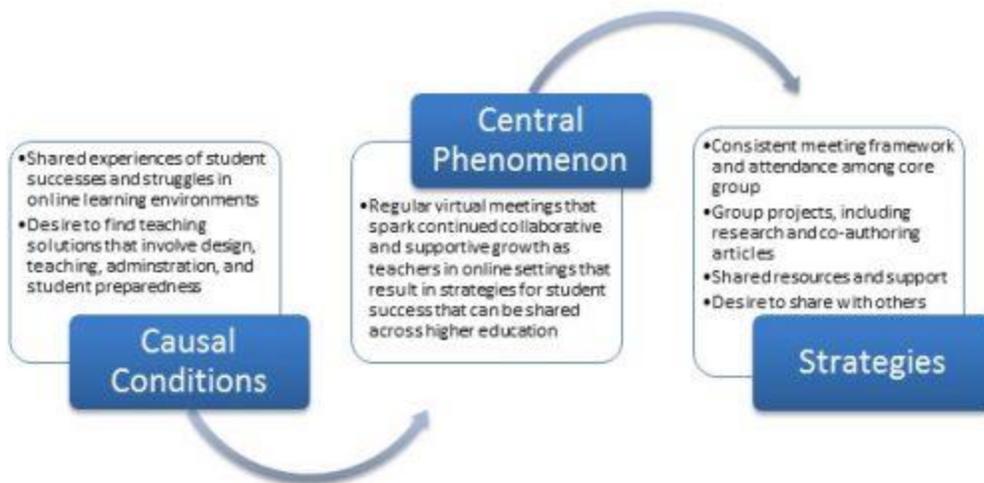


Figure 1. A visual diagram outlining the conditions that influence (causal conditions), the central phenomenon, and the actions or interactions that result (strategies)

The three factors outlined in Figure 1 are nestled within a context of the PLC as previously described, as well as consequences related to the central phenomenon. The factors align with the key PLC characteristics described earlier that have been shown to improve teaching and student achievement: collaboration, a focus on student learning, and a desire for continuous growth as educators (Vescio et al., 2008).

Processes of Interaction. Once an asynchronous, on-demand learning environment for the group was developed in November 2014, the facilitator began using communication tools to send in-depth meeting notes following monthly session reminders a few days in advance of meetings. In addition, the facilitator created an online and welcoming atmosphere where any member could help shape the upcoming agenda. For example, the facilitator always acknowledged members in a substantive way and found ways to build bridges between various topics suggested. In addition, the facilitator routinely communicated in ways that provided encouragement and advanced the topics under discussion through sharing and open-ended prompts for consideration in advance of meetings. (Since the study concluded, the group moved to a rotating facilitator model.) Members routinely share practices and resources together, such as discussion prompts, rubrics, and research from the field. The PLC includes key elements that learning community experts prescribe in order to develop learning communities that can both adapt and thrive in a changing landscape, as described earlier.

Consequences. The outcomes related to the processes of interaction of this PLC include

- a published, coauthored article,
- a repository of shared tools and research related to enhancing engaging instruction in online settings,

- continued desire to advance to the field of practice related to online learning environments, engaging instruction, and student success.

Of note are the perspectives among participants about the group itself at the beginning of the study (before an article was developed and published) as compared to the perspectives shared during the follow-up survey at the study's conclusion. There appears to be a notable shift in optimism about the group's ability to contribute work to the field of practice between the initial survey and a follow-up survey four months later, after the article has been submitted. In the follow-up survey, participants expressed gratitude and excitement about the product that had been collaboratively constructed. This feedback sparked a desire to further explore an emerging theme related to supportive and collaborative growth that resulted in sharing with others. As a result, a final interview with respondents was conducted in late winter 2016. Three of the four survey respondents were able to attend the interview. The following are highlights of those conversations:

“What does collaboration and sharing mean to you?”

- Growing together
- Feeling safe enough to put ideas out that might be crazy, but we have the willingness to explore and be open to various viewpoints
- The ability to be open to what's shared
- Learning how to get along with others and express opinions in a respectful way—conversations that are mature and respectful

“How did it feel to work on an article together and hear that it was published?”

- Because it worked so well, I want to keep moving toward a collaborative space *and* developing products together.
- [Respondent who just learned the article was accepted] Amazing—it's such a good day right now! I felt like I always loved this group, and when we worked on the article it was so cool—so rewarding.
- Suddenly feel like we have a purpose and a focus. *This* is what we can do together, and it's so much more than I could have done on my own. Togetherness, collaboration, cooperation...it felt seamless, and that doesn't always happen with projects.
- It felt good, like it was a true—the best example of collaborative effort. I've had nightmare experiences where the product was not as good. Although we brought disparate ideas to the project, the article seems to speak with one voice.
- I'm encouraged about the future and hope the same thing will happen with the next article.

“How does our work correlate to student success?”

- I always learn and feel like I'm becoming a better instructor because I continue to grow every month when we get together.
- My teaching has improved—I'm more aware of how I teach to ensure student success.

- Our work keeps me focused on student success and helps me not fall into traps of repeating things that don't work. It reminds me that—maybe naively—I have high hopes that if we publish we can share models for other people and have a broader impact.
- This work influences my work as an instructional designer and I like to think all faculty I work with benefit.
- The classes I have designed since joining this group have been more thoughtful about instructional choices.

These attitudes resonate strongly with research that shows engagement in PLCs results in greater confidence, enthusiasm for collaborative work, and increased dedication to practice change (Cordingley et al., 2003).

Implications and Future Work

The study provided a descriptive snapshot about processes of interaction, attitudes, and perceived practice change among participants in the Plymouth State University Online Reflective Practitioner Group. The research illuminates considerations for developing best practices related to fully online PLCs, such as

- a shared mission,
- a desire for solutions directly related to the shared mission,
- facilitated, consistent meeting times that use synchronous online collaboration tools,
- access to and use of an online, on-demand virtual workspace,
- regular attendance by participants,
- collaborative projects that seek solutions related to the shared mission,
- a desire to share project findings to enhance student success.

The group's progress toward collaborative projects, such as the coauthored and published article, as well as its desire to share research and outcomes with others holds promise for future studies that empirically measure the impact a fully online PLC has on engaging instruction and student outcomes. Future implications for study may also include researching perceptions among administrators, colleagues not involved in the group, and students. It would be beneficial to understand precisely how participation in a fully online PLC that is social constructivist in nature impacts changes in instructional engagement strategies in online learning environments, student learning outcomes, feelings of engagement and community connectedness among adjunct faculty, and openness to projects that embrace a peer review approach for continual improvement in curriculum design and teaching practice.

The study was a beginning exploration of a fully online PLC within higher education and particularly about how to develop enduring and effective fully online PLCs. Future studies are needed to better understand best practices in forming and facilitating fully online PLCs, as well as empirical research that explores how participation in fully online PLCs results in organizational, teaching, and student outcomes (Blitz, 2013). Since the study concluded, the Online Reflective Practitioner Group is working to implement and evaluate enhanced

engagement strategies in online courses to improve engaged instruction in online learning environments and plans to publish and share results via outreach activities later this year.

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