



Peer Learning Community Guide

Diane Schilder, EdD, Kirsty Clarke Brown, PhD, & Kathi Gillaspay, MEd

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Information Request

States and technical assistance centers have asked for guidance on establishing and maintaining a peer learning community (PLC).

Goal

This document is designed to delineate the steps to establish and sustain a Peer Learning Community (PLC). We begin with a definition of a PLC and then present the steps to take to establish a PLC.

What is a PLC?

- Peer learning communities (PLCs) provide a model for connecting people in the spirit of learning, knowledge sharing, and collaboration.
- PLCs connect people within and across state agencies, as well as across states, who might not otherwise have the opportunity to interact, frequently or at all.
- A PLC can provide a context for people to communicate and share information and experiences that build understanding and insight about barriers to success and promising practices.
- A PLC can support dialogue between people who come together to explore new possibilities, solve challenging problems, and create new opportunities.
- The PLC can serve as a vehicle for ongoing communication and self-reflection.
- Given the range of experiences among participants, the PLC can provide a platform for those with more experience to share with those beginning to support formative assessment. Moreover, more experienced members of the PLC will learn from those with less experience about the challenges, issues, and questions that could inform their policies and practices.

Background and Context

The Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes (CEELO) has established and supported PLCs among state early learning specialists.

Methodology

To learn how to best establish and sustain a PLC, CEELO staff interviewed other national technical assistance center staff who support PLCs, searched for materials available online, reflected on early experiences in the development of the CEELO PLCs and summarized key lessons learned.

- The PLC can capture and diffuse existing knowledge to help improve practice, by providing a forum to identify solutions to common problems and a process to collect and evaluate best practices.

Phases of PLC Development and Implementation

Developing and sustaining a PLC occurs in three phases: startup, full implementation and sustainability. These phases may overlap somewhat. One of the key changes over the phases of development is the leadership and facilitation of the PLC. During the startup phase, the assigned PLC lead will gather information about interests and needs of members of the community and will provide direction to the PLC. During the full implementation phase the members will engage as co-facilitators in the PLC. During the sustainability phase, members take on a leadership role and engage in activities both virtually and outside of the formal PLC meetings. Based on a review of the literature and experiences with PLCs, the list of possible activities to establish and sustain a PLC are below. The order in which these activities might be used vary depending upon the nature of the community being established.

Principles of PLC Functioning

- Members will engage in collaborative processes and the free flow of ideas and exchange of information is encouraged.
- Participants will be encouraged to actively participate in conversation.
- Structure of the PLC must be consistent with what the research shows about the best practices, and include a vision that the PLC will ultimately be sustained by participants.

Start Up Phase

This phase is typically defined as the first six months of the PLC.

- Engage members through regular calls or meetings, during which members share questions and experiences with policies and practices related to a specific content issue. Each month one or two members will share questions and issues and members will present policies and practices on specific topics.
 - It is recommended that groups of individuals from like groups (i.e. same state, region or program) convene together (ideally co-located) to participate in follow up conversation and debriefing after the call.
- Begin each call with introductions and clarification of group learning objectives derived from the baseline survey and the previous month's conversation.
- Emphasize the focus of each call to be the identification of opportunities and problems as well as resources that will be beneficial to participants.
- Encourage facilitators and members to challenge one another on how the learning is being applied.
- Ask members to develop action plans for applying the learning and commit to the group to move forward.

- Request that participants commit to ongoing participation in the PLC, including sharing experiences, questions, lessons learned, or issues they are grappling with (understanding that the PLC membership will change over time based on needs of members).
- Focus the topics for the first six months on the priorities from survey respondents who plan to participate or are participating in the PLC.

Full Implementation Phase

This phase begins about six months after the first call and continues until regular co-facilitation of the PLC exists.

- Continue to engage members through regular calls or meetings.
- Seek out volunteer members of the PLC to assist with co-facilitation.
- Meet in person at conferences or meetings that members regularly attend such as annual meetings and professional conferences.
- Begin calls or meetings with a short review of key objectives met to date, questions that the PLC is addressing and objectives that were developed based on the last time the PLC convened.
- Consider establishing a secure webpage that includes resources and links, possibly with blog and discussion capability that will enable the regular easy sharing of documents, questions and materials among members.
- Ask members to share action plans that have been developed and to reflect on progress and lessons learned to date.
- Focus topics during the implementation phase on suggestions derived from members of the PLC. Consider conducting a survey of members to determine focus and priorities, and share results with members and PLC sponsoring organizations.

Sustainability Phase

This phase does not have a specific time frame, but begins when leadership and facilitation shift mainly to the membership of the PLC, with logistical and resource support from the sponsoring organization.

- Meet in person at conferences or meetings that members regularly attend such as annual meetings and professional conferences.
- Welcome new members as they join the PLC, invite their participation and ask them to share issues and successes.
 - Consider offering mentorship from existing members to new members, depending on the wishes of the members of the PLC.
- Explore new technologies to continue to support the virtual sharing of information, reflections and promising practices.
- Ask members to share action plans that have been developed and to reflect on progress and lessons learned to date.
- Continue to focus topic selection from those derived from members of the PLC.
- Promote regular reflection of progress and lessons learned.

Key Steps, Activities and Considerations

Conducting a successful PLC requires defined roles and clear communication between staff throughout all the phases. We identified steps, with corresponding activities and considerations, across the life of a PLC from the initial planning phases to ongoing review. The steps have been divided into four areas:

- A. Planning the Peer Learning Community**
- B. Launching the Peer Learning Community**
- C. Ongoing Calls and Contacts**
- D. Ongoing Review for Improvement**

A. Planning the Peer Learning Community	
Step	Activities and Considerations
1. Convene a PLC planning group of lead staff and consultants to conceptualize the content of the PLC, resources needed, scope, and possible sequence.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Designate one or two lead staff members to coordinate the PLC and identify other experts to serve as thought-partners. Explore possibility of co-planning and co-facilitating the PLC to assure the leadership represents a range of perspectives. Unless otherwise indicated, the PLC lead(s) are responsible for the planning and launching activities. • The planning group helps identify key stakeholders (number 2 below), reviews responses to surveys, and helps shape the kick-off and subsequent PLC meetings. (Details follow.)
2. Determine other staff who will be provide logistical support. It is important to have staff trained in the online technology that will be used to support the PLC.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify online support tools, which might include Mailchimp, GotoMeeting/GotoWebinar, Adobe Connect, WebEx, and an online survey tool such as SurveyMonkey. • The logistical support person will use these tools to send out emails with surveys, to communicate details about the PLC, and to provide registration information. • Set up a time to coordinate with the logistical support person on a regular basis until the PLC is successfully launched, then coordination calls can be less frequent.
3. Determine whether to co-sponsor the PLC.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reach out to other technical assistance centers and/or other national organizations working on similar topics to maximize outreach and reduce possible duplication of efforts. • Consider identifying co-leads to share the responsibilities of the PLC leads.
4. Develop template for emails, Powerpoints, and other communication.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use the project logo and the name of the PLC to develop a template for all emails, Powerpoints and materials to be developed. • If the PLC is partnering with another organization to sponsor the PLC, develop a joint logo.
5. Determine the target stakeholders for the PLC.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The target audience should reflect those who are responsible for administering and managing the issues that the PLC will address.

A. Planning the Peer Learning Community	
Step	Activities and Considerations
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Determine if the PLC is designed to focus on the same stakeholders over time or if there is some flexibility in participation in the PLC.
6. Obtain email lists of all target stakeholders and compile into an Excel file that is shared and is clearly labeled with the date.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Make sure to track all staff and consultants working on the PLC as well as the regular participants through any project databases or tracking systems. The logistical support person should clearly label each spreadsheet and should send to all key personnel involved in the PLC.
7. Develop a survey to individuals on target stakeholders list obtain information about the characteristics of the participants and interest in key topics.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The logistical lead can help put questions into the survey but the PLC lead should develop the questions. Create an address list or use the address book feature of survey technology to send the survey and targeted follow up emails to non-respondents. Use the template for the PLC. The logistical support person should send out the survey. It is possible for the survey to come from someone other than the person sending it, so determine whether the logistical support person is the contact or the PLC lead or another coordinator will be listed in the ‘sent’ line. Ensure that the survey mechanism being used has a reporting feature that allows for analysis. When survey is complete, download survey results. Review the survey results to inform the conceptualization and development of the first PLC webinar or call.
8. Create a website for the PLC.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contact the project website host to create a secure section of the website for PLC members only. This section is closed so that participants can share drafts and engage in an open discussion. If not available, consider other group web options (i.e. Wiggio, Google Groups) The home page should be viewable by the public and should include a link to the PLC coordinator’s email, letting people know that if they are interested in joining, they should contact that person. The categories for the PLC that are recommended are as follows: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Monthly calls</i> – organized chronologically, which includes PowerPoints, materials and notes <i>Resources</i> – documents prepared by national organizations, participants in the PLC, and states. These can include drafts of policies, guidance, regulations, etc. that members want to share with one another <i>Discussions</i> – threaded discussion of key topics that is

A. Planning the Peer Learning Community	
Step	Activities and Considerations
	<p>moderated by the PLC leads with the logistical contact assisting to support the interactive nature of the discussion</p> <p>d) <i>Key contacts</i>—list of participants in alphabetical order with agency name and email address.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The logistical support person should update the members’ only page on a regular basis. The PLC lead should determine the timeframe for updating the information, but it should, at a minimum, be updated soon after every call.
9. Give PLC members access to the members-only portion of project website.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The logistical coordinator should email all participants with the password and information needed to access the members’ only pages. • Consider giving access only after individuals complete the survey that asks for initial interests and background information.
10. Develop a dissemination strategy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a strategy for disseminating information about the PLC based on the topic, the members’ interest in expanding the community, and possible wider interest. • Possible strategies include: developing a card with the key contact’s name and brief information about the PLC and encourage the leads to hand out the card at conferences where possible; emailing potential participants (i.e. those in other groups or listservs) on a regular basis; and encouraging PLC members to reach out to others within their states and existing networks.

B.Launching the Peer Learning Community	
Step	Activities and Considerations
11. Conceptualize and develop the kick-off webinar with the team.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PLC leads meet to determine agenda items and organization, time for each item and interactive components of the first meeting. • The kick-off webinar should provide an overview of the purpose and objectives of the PLC, expectations and hopes for participation, the research on the selected topic, and should include the voice of at least one representative of key stakeholder groups.
12. Determine the dates/times and duration of each time the PLC convenes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider the frequency that the PLC should meet to promote relationship building and problem solving (i.e. monthly).Some PLCs change the date/time so that individuals who have other regularly scheduled meetings can attend whereas others schedule the same date/time. On the other hand, by scheduling the same date/time there is less likely to be confusion and more regular participation over time.
13. Schedule a conference call line.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The PLC lead should coordinate with the logistical support person to schedule the PLC. Once the time is confirmed, the logistical support person should secure the conference call line and complete any relevant calendars or activities to reserve the line. • It is important to have dedicated connections to minimize double scheduling and interruptions during calls.
14. Once the dates/times are determined, send a Save the Date email.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use address book, listserv or mail software (such as MailChip), to send the Save the Date email. • Consider who should receive the invitation, including those who have participated in other webinars on the same topic, or those that belong to larger listservs in the organization.
15. Schedule the webinar using available technology (i.e.,GotoWebinar, WebEx, Adobe Connect).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The logistical support person should send a webinar invitation and registration (if needed) to all individuals who expressed an interest in the PLC. • PLC lead should work with the logistical support person to set up the webinar and to draft an email to all of those interested in joining, (the email should include information on how to register for or connect to the call, and if appropriate, indicate that registration is required). • The email should include details about the online webinar, the topic of the PLC for the month, any panelists who will be presenting, and the call in number.

C. Ongoing Calls and Contacts	
Step	Activities and Considerations
16. Develop the agenda for each time the PLC convenes. meeting.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The PLC lead with the planning team should develop a detailed agenda for each time the PLC convenes using a planning template. • Each meeting should begin with a brief update on progress of the PLC since the last call, a review of the key people who are on the call (by position rather than by listing everyone), and an overview of the agenda. • The PLC planning team should determine who will reach out to any stakeholders who will be invited to be on the agenda, how they will be contacted, and when their decision to participate must be finalized.
17. Reach out to panelists.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The PLC lead or person from the PLC planning group should reach out to potential panelists and provide them with information about the PLC; the topic of discussion; and ask the panelist to develop materials (if necessary) or offer to develop slides on behalf of the panelist. • If relevant, the panelist should be encouraged to share links to the state website and materials developed by the state.
18. Develop materials for the meeting including PowerPoints and links.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The PLC planning group should develop a PowerPoint to guide the presentation. Images of presenters should be included and graphics should be embedded wherever possible to make the meeting more like an in-person conversation. Web-links and materials should also be included in PowerPoints. • Tips that should be included on all presentations include: 1) Request that participants hang up rather than hitting the hold button if they receive another call, so that the participants don't hear music in the background; 2) Technical requirements to be able to view the screen; 3) Notice that the call will be recorded for note-taking purposes only; 4) Contact email and phone number for person who can address technical issues; 5) Information about how the chat feature works.
19. Send a reminder email with webinar link and call in number.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One week before the PLC meeting, the logistical support person should send a reminder email. • One day before the PLC, the logistical support person should send the Webinar link to all who registered. • If meeting materials are available at these times, they should be included in the email.
20. Log onto the conference line and webinar 15 minutes early on the day of the meeting.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For at least the first several meetings of the PLC, it is important that the PLC lead and logistical coordinator log onto the webinar site at least 15 minutes prior to the start of the call to ensure that the technology is working appropriately and the conference line is working.

C. Ongoing Calls and Contacts	
<p>21. On the day of the call ensure someone is taking meeting notes.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The logistical support person should keep a running record of the meeting, including the participants, discussions and who is asking questions and the answers that are provided. • The meeting notes will be shared only with PLC members. • The notes are designed to provide information to participants about who asked questions, what issues are being considered, and what steps the PLC plans to take to address issues in the future.
<p>22. Create a secure section of existing project websites for the PLC.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contact the website host to create a secure section of the website for PLC members only. This section is closed so that participants can share drafts and engage in an open discussion. • The home page should be viewable by the public and should include a link to the PLC coordinator’s email, letting people know that if they are interested in joining, they should contact that person. • The categories for the PLC that are recommended are as follows: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) <i>Monthly calls</i> – organized chronologically, which includes Powerpoints, materials and notes b) <i>Resources</i> – documents prepared by national organizations, participants in the PLC, and states. These can include drafts of policies, guidance, regulations, etc. that members want to share with one another c) <i>Discussions</i> – threaded discussion of key topics that is moderated by the PLC lead with the logistical contact assisting with Web 2.0 technology to support the interactive nature of the discussion d) <i>Key contacts</i>—list of participants in alphabetical order with agency name and email address. • The logistical support person should update the members’ only page on a regular basis. The PLC lead should determine the timeframe for updating the information, but it should, at a minimum, be updated soon after every call.
<p>23. Implement dissemination strategy.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carry out the steps articulated in the dissemination strategy by sending each member meeting notes and links and consider expanding the strategy based on needs of the PLC members. (Steps 24 and 25 below are part of the dissemination strategy.)
<p>24. Edit meeting notes and post notes, PowerPoint, and to PLC section of the project webpage.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The logistical support person should compile all information and assist with uploading.
<p>25. Post public documents to the website.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The logistical support lead should provide the logistics support person with all public documents that should be posted in the resources in the relevant section.

D. Ongoing Review for Improvement	
26. Evaluate the success of the PLC.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On at least an annual basis, develop a survey of members to assess the quality and impact of the PLC. • Use the information both to track outcomes and to inform the future development of the community.
27. Encourage members to meet in person at events where a significant number of members attend.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In addition to the virtual PLC, it is important for members to be able to meet in person. Consider events which a significant number of members are likely to attend, such as the annual roundtable, NAEYC, or project meetings. • Encourage members to get together for an early morning breakfast, a dinner, or during a time that is not scheduled. Such informal gatherings can help sustain the PLC.
28. Determine whether the PLC should continue, or the work of the community is complete.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is important that the objectives of the PLC are clearly articulated at the inception of the community and re-visited periodically. • Members of the PLC should engage in a conversation at least annually about whether the current community has achieved all of the initial goals and whether the members should continue to convene to achieve new objectives or conclude. • Develop a schedule for evaluation and/or needs assessments. Include times with PLC planning team to regularly review results and determine next steps.

Resources - Articles

Bolam, R., McMahon, A., Stoll, L., Thomas, S., & Wallace, M., with Greenwood, A., Hawkey, K., Ingram, M., Atkinson, A., & Smith, M. (2005). *Creating and sustaining effective professional learning communities. Research Report No 637*. Annesley, Nottingham: University of Bristol. Retrieved from http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/images/Creating%20and%20Sustaining%20PLCs_tcm4-631034.pdf

Cambridge, D., Kaplan, S., & Suter, V., (2006). *Step-by-step guide for designing and cultivating communities of practice*. Educause. Retrieved from: <https://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/NLI0531.pdf>

Wenger, E. & Snyder, W.M. (2000). Communities of practice – The organizational frontier. *Harvard Business Review*. Retrieved from http://itu.dk/people/petermeldgaard/B12/lektion%207/Communities%20of%20Practice_The%20Organizational%20Frontier.pdf

Wirth, R., A. (2006). *Employee development within a framework of communities of practice*. Entarga.com Retrieved from <http://www.entarga.com/km/PeerLearningCoP.pdf>

Resources - Websites

Etienne Wenger is considered the “father” of the community of practice. This is the [resource site](#) for Wenger-Trayner, an organization that specializes in organizational and social learning strategies. We recommend the following two websites on communities of practice.

- [List of Resources](#). This page includes many resources about communities of practice (explore section 1.2).
- [Brief Introduction to Communities of Practice](#). This page has easily accessible information on the definition of communities, what they look like in practice, and how and where they are being used. There are links to many other resources, including additional articles by Wenger.

SEDL's [page on professional learning communities](#) provides a number of links about learning communities, as well as very thorough information on the five main characteristics of a learning community: supportive and shared leadership, collective creativity, shared values and vision, supportive conditions, and shared personal practice.

ABOUT CEELO:

One of 22 Comprehensive Centers funded by the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, the Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes (CEELO) will strengthen the capacity of State Education Agencies (SEAs) to lead sustained improvements in early learning opportunities and outcomes. CEELO will work in partnership with SEAs, state and local early childhood leaders, and other federal and national technical assistance (TA) providers to promote innovation and accountability.

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