

# Faculty PLCs for Maintaining Community and Online Teaching During Remote Work



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## Abstract

A weekly professional learning community (PLC) was established for faculty members within a special education department for the 2020-2021 academic year. The goal of the PLC was to support the transition to online classes and to maintain the workplace community. Pre and post surveys using the Sense of Community Index-2 (Chavis et al., 2008b) and additional implementation questions were administered to all faculty members. Meeting notes were also analyzed using Community of Inquiry (CoI) Model (Garrison et al., 2000). This analysis revealed the most prevalent topic for discussion was teaching presence. The overall sense of community was maintained in the pre and post survey and a relationship between a faculty member's sense of community and implementation of PLC resources was identified.

## Introduction

In the 2020-2021 academic year many faculty members experienced extended remote work and the continued transition to online learning with the dependence on instructional technology as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Traditionally on-the-ground universities were now poised with extended preparation for online teaching and providing training for online instruction. To effectively support faculty during this unprecedented time, professional development needs to honor teaching experiences, areas of expertise, and personal interests to engage the faculty and enhance motivation to implement changes (Hutchison & Woodward, 2018; D. A. Schmidt et al., 2009; Vongkulluksn et al., 2018), however this approach was not often utilized. This study examined how the implementation of an informal learning community impacted online teaching practices. A professional learning community (PLC) was established within a department to help faculty maintain a sense of community during remote work and support the implementation of online teaching tools and strategies during this unprecedented transition.

A professional learning community (PLC) is a professional development framework with many definitions across the literature, but it focuses on learning and working collaboratively to improve the craft of teaching (Dufour, 2006; Hilliard, 2012). It can help to create a sense of community as well as offering a space where faculty can explore how to integrate technology in instructional plans, explore new methodologies, and share academic experiences with peers (Banasik & Dean, 2016). Learning communities create a comfortable environment where faculty can interact and communicate with peers by analyzing tools or strategies based on instructional goals instead of the simple function and execution of the tool (Baran, 2016). This study partially replicated the work of Bedford and Rossow (2017) in investigating the relationship between faculty PLCs, implementation, and community; however there were some adjustments.

Participants were asked to complete a pre and post survey regarding their sense of community and learning practices. Session notes were also created by the researcher to capture the discussions and strategies. These notes were shared with the participants to confirm validity and were qualitatively analyzed. Finally, a Microsoft Teams Course was created to store session notes and additional resources based on the PLC discussions to share

with all full and part-time faculty, regardless of PLC attendance. The findings of the research will benefit the field by identifying methods to increase a sense of community among full time and part time faculty. The study will also explore the relationship between application of strategies and tools and sense of community.

## **Literature Review**

### **Problem**

The sudden transition to online teaching required an adaptation of practices for many faculty members (Wilson et al., 2021) as online teaching continued through the pandemic. In a 2018 survey, *Inside Higher Ed* reported that about 44% of faculty members had experience teaching online (Jaschik & Lederman, 2018), indicating that capacity building and adjusting beyond a temporary pivot to online was needed. Trammell and LaForge (2017) made the analogy that teaching in-person is like a leisurely car cross country road trip. Detours can be taken based on passenger interest, similar to adding supplemental material or adjustments during an in-person class. Online teaching is more like a train cross country trip. It has prescribed stops and once it starts on its path, it continues until its destination. To achieve this transition to online instruction, many faculty members required more than technical professional development to convert their courses to an online delivery method (Ni Shé et al., 2019; S. Schmidt et al., 2016). This professional development should focus on pedagogy, be flexible based on faculty needs, and provide emotional support during the process (Kilgour et al., 2019; Ni Shé et al., 2019; Northcote et al., 2015) In addition to building online teaching capacity, maintaining social community is also an important component to innovation (Yu et al., 2021).

Based on this challenge, the current study investigated the impact of a faculty PLC on sense of community and implementation of tools and strategies in online teaching. The literature review will first provide a background of faculty learning and sense of community. It will then transition to PLCs in higher education and the Community of Inquiry Framework in online learning as these two approaches were utilized to inform this study.

### **Faculty Learning**

Informal learning activities within the higher education landscape have demonstrated stronger impacts on professional practice than formal learning opportunities (Gerken et al., 2016), especially when learning new technologies and teaching online (Northcote et al., 2015; S. Schmidt et al., 2016). Schmidt et al. (2016) investigated how faculty learn how to teach online. They identified specific best practices in professional development to support instructors learning how to teach online. Four themes emerged from their research: meaningful professional development topics (beyond just technology), smaller and more focused training, informal learning, and self-directed learning. Similarly, over 10,700 faculty responded to a national survey reporting that the majority of institutions did not provide adequate training and support to design and teach online courses (Seaman, 2009). Research in the field has consistently questioned the effectiveness of formal, single session trainings (Gerken et al., 2016; S. Schmidt et al., 2016) and promotes more collaborative and informal approaches (LaPointe Terosky & Heasley, 2015; Lewis & Ewing, 2016; S. Schmidt et al., 2016). This research focuses on a collaborative PLC approach to support online teaching for faculty while also promoting community.

### **Sense of Community**

Remote teaching poses challenges with isolation, motivation, and engagement for faculty (Toner et al., 2021). During the pandemic, traditionally on-the-ground professors and adjuncts had to shift to being remote employees for over a year. The PLC was instituted to support technology integration and online teaching, but also to combat professional isolation and promote a sense of community. LaPointe Terosky and Heasley (2015) researched supporting teaching online for full and part time faculty and found that the majority of faculty members were looking for collaborative and reflective support around pedagogy and professional identity versus technical implementation. Similarly, Ferencz researched adjunct faculty with an existing high sense of community and they reported the desire for “more synchronous meetings or places to collaborate and dialogue” (2017, p. 14). During the pandemic and remote teaching, establishing a sense of community is crucial to adaptability and resilience (Saleh Al-Omoush et al., 2021). Providing consistent access to colleagues during remote work was crucial to maintaining connections. The avenue to provide social connection and strategies for online teaching within this study was a PLC.

## **PLCs in Higher Education**

A plethora of research exists on PLCs for professional development spanning from K-12 to higher education (Sai & Siraj, 2015). A professional learning community (PLC) focuses on learning and working collaboratively to improve the craft of teaching (Dufour, 2006; Hilliard, 2012). A PLC can focus on a variety of topics and be facilitated in many ways. Within higher education the term faculty learning community (FLC) is also utilized and is defined as a group of “cross-disciplinary faculty...who engage in an active, collaborative, yearlong program with a curriculum about enhancing teaching and learning and with frequent seminars and activities that provide learning, development, the scholarship of teaching, and community building” (Cox, 2004, p. 8). Given the flexible, open-ended nature of the faculty meetings within this study, the term PLC is utilized and best fits the approach. PLCs in higher education have been found to build community and improve teaching practices (Stewart & Belcher, 2019; Tucker & Quintero-Ares, 2021). By offering the PLC to part and full time faculty members, the collective experiences of both groups can be shared within the PLC. Developing a sense of community, pedagogy, and personal reflection is crucial for teacher educators (Williams et al., 2012) and establishing a PLC for all instructors provides the platform to promote these reflections and relationships.

## **Community of Inquiry (Col)**

The Community of Inquiry (Col) Model (Garrison et al., 2000) was developed as a learning framework for online learning effectiveness. The framework is divided into three large areas that encompass a learner’s educational experience: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). Social presence emphasizes the establishment of a community, allowing learners to express themselves openly through a variety of methods within an online course and establishing an online community (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). Cognitive presence within an online course is “the extent to which learners are able to construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse” (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007, p. 161). Finally, teaching presence can be defined as “design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes” (Anderson et al., 2001, p. 5). Integrating the three components of the Col framework positively impacts student learning in an online class (Giannousi & Kioumourtzoglou, 2016; Yandra et al., 2021).

## **Research Questions**

The main goal of the project was to support faculty during this unique transition, to continue the sense of community during virtual working, and to share resources across faculty members. The following research questions guided the investigation:

- What impact, if any, does a weekly virtual PLC have on faculty member’s sense of community?
- To what extent do PLC members transfer their PLC knowledge and strategies to the classroom?
- Is a sense of community among PLC participants a predictor for transfer of learning into practice?
- What are the overall themes of discussion within the PLC sessions?

## **Methodology**

This mixed methods case study utilized three methods to collect data: electronic pre/post surveys, PLC session notes, and participant access to PLC resources on Microsoft Teams. Qualitative and quantitative analysis was utilized to investigate the impact, if any, on the PLC. A concurrent triangulation approach was taken to the mixed methods design (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This approach utilizes the the qualitative data (session notes) and quantitative data (survey responses) to corroborate the findings on the impact of the PLC.

The participants were asked to complete a pre and post survey regarding their sense of community and application of learning from the PLC. The researcher also took notes during the PLC regarding discussion topics using the Community of Inquiry (Garrison et al., 2000) for online learning as a frame. The discussions within the PLC sessions were categorized within the three major sections of the framework. The researcher’s notes were also sent to the participants for validation and were qualitatively analyzed to pair with the quantitative survey analysis. During data analysis, the notes were coded based on the alignment with the Col framework. The PLC

resources (articles, videos, and guides) were also posted on the PLC Microsoft Teams page. Participant access to resources were gathered to evaluate the overall level of interaction with resources. This analysis feature is native within the Microsoft Teams platform.

### **Setting**

The study was conducted within the college of education at a public university in the northeast United States. Each week, 30 faculty members, full and part time, were invited to the PLC meeting. Faculty members were mostly from the special education department, but new faculty members were also invited from the elementary education department.

### **Sample**

Throughout the 21 PLC sessions, a total of 16 different faculty members attended the meetings: seven part-time faculty members and nine full-time faculty members. The frequency ranged from attending once to 13 times. The average attendance rate was 4 times throughout the 2020-2021 academic year. Three faculty members, one full time and two part time, attended more than 10 sessions. Three full time faculty and four part time faculty attended one PLC session.

### **Virtual Platform**

A Microsoft Team was created for the PLC. All 30 faculty members were added to the PLC in Teams. Meeting notes, resources, and chats were added to the Microsoft Team. The meetings were held via Teams and comments were added to the General Channel with reminders of meetings, questions, or links to resources.

### **Sense of Community Index-2**

To measure faculty member's sense of community before and after the PLC series, the Sense of Community Index-2 (SCI-2) was utilized. The SCI-2 (Chavis et al., 2008b) has controversy within the field regarding validity in measuring multi-dimensional aspects of community (Cope et al., 2020), however, the use of the tool was simply to provide a gauge of the general sense of community before and after the PLC series throughout the academic year, similar to the work of Bedford and Rossow (2017). The SCI-2 provides an overall sense of community score, in addition to sub-scores in the categories of reinforcement of needs, membership, influence, and shared emotional connection (Chavis et al., 2008a).

### **PLC Facilitation**

In contrast to Bedford and Rossow (2017) where PLC sessions were structured with readings and themes, the PLC sessions within the current study were informal with no set agenda. The PLC facilitation mirrored the previous work of the researcher (Tucker & Quintero-Ares, 2021), where the sessions were open to the needs of the faculty. Each session began with general questions of: What worked this week? What didn't? What do you need? The researcher utilized the principles of universal design for learning (UDL) (CAST, 2020) and multiple means of engagement to structure the PLC. Multiple means of engagement emphasizes individual choice, relevance, value, authenticity, and fosters collaboration and community (CAST, 2020). The goal of implementing this approach was to encourage participation without adding additional workload onto faculty.

### **Findings**

The findings were gathered after the conclusion of the Spring 2021 semester. The pre and post survey responses were gathered and the meeting notes were analyzed.

### **Pre and Post Survey**

The pre and post surveys were sent to all 30 faculty members invited to the PLC. The pre-survey was completed by 8 faculty members and the post survey was completed by 6. The Sense of Community Index-2 (SCI-2) total score was utilized, rather than breaking down into the five different dimensions. The average sense of community

score with the pre survey was 48.75 and the post-survey average was 48.67. The total scores reflected maintaining a sense of community, but not increasing it. The remaining analysis will focus on the post-survey results.

### *Implementation*

In the post survey seven additional questions were added regarding implementation of tools and strategies:

- I have implemented new strategies in my teaching as a result of the PLC.
- I have implemented new tools in my teaching as a result of the PLC.
- I have implemented new expectations in my teaching as a result of the PLC.
- I have accessed the resources on our PLC Microsoft Team Course.
- The resources posted on the Microsoft Team Course are helpful to my practice.
- The discussions in the PLC met my teaching needs.
- After being a participant in the Sped PLC, I have new ideas about teaching strategies.

Faculty were asked to rate these items on a scale of 0-3: not at all (0), somewhat (1), mostly (2), and completely (3). The average score for these questions is included in Table 1 below.

*Table 1*

#### **Average Response for Implementation Questions**

<b>Question</b>	<b>Average Score (n=6)</b>
I have implemented new strategies in my teaching as a result of the PLC.	2.17
I have implemented new tools in my teaching as a result of the PLC.	2.17
I have implemented new expectations in my teaching as a result of the PLC.	1.83
I have accessed the resources on our PLC Microsoft Team Course.	1.67
The resources posted on the Microsoft Team Course are helpful to my practice.	2
The discussions in the PLC met my teaching needs.	2.5
After being a participant in the Sped PLC, I have new ideas about teaching strategies.	2.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>13.6</b>

The survey responses indicate that faculty found the most benefit from the discussions within the PLC and ideas that generated from the sessions. Overall, the faculty who responded to the survey reported “mostly” (2) implementing information from the PLC in their teaching. During the sessions faculty were asked about different strategies and tools. Based on discussions within the PLC faculty shared that they implemented a variety of tools/strategies: self-care passes for students, the use of interactive slide tools for formative assessment (Pear Deck or Near Pod), video based discussions (FlipGrid), course format communications, explicit instructions for online work, and shared document for break out rooms.

### *Post-Survey Analysis*

For each of the participants that completed the post survey their total SCI-2 score (out of 75) was analyzed against their total implementation score (out of 21) to identify if there was any relationship between the of sense of community and implementation of tools/strategies from the PLC. Although the faculty who completed the post-survey might not have frequently attended the PLC sessions, they were included in the emails, resources, and materials. Given the sample size and abnormal data, the Related-Samples Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test was utilized. Table 2 provides the total sense of community scores and total implementation score by participant. This non-parametric analysis compares data from the same case to determine any significance between the two scores (Tanner, 2012). The small data set was not large enough for normal distribution, but a *W* value can be calculated. The *W* value for the set is 0, with N=6. The *W* value indicates significance at  $p < .05$ . Table 3 provides the values for the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test and the additional values.

Table 2

**Participant Survey Values**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Total Sense of Community</b>	<b>Total Implementation Score</b>
1	56*	21*
2	28	11
3	59*	15*
4	57*	13
5	39	12
6	53	17*

\* indicates top 3 totals

Table 2 illustrates the raw values for each post-survey response. Beyond the Wilcoxon value, a trend can be identified. Participants 3, 4, and 1 have the highest sense of community scores (59, 57, and 56). They also have two of the top three implementation scores: Participant 3, 15 and Participant 1, 21. The lowest sense of community score (Participant 2 - 28) also had the lowest implementation score (11).

Table 3

**Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test**

W-value	0
Mean Difference	37.67
Sum of positive ranks	21
Sum of negative ranks	0
Z-value	-2.2014
Sample Size	6

**Session Notes**

The session notes for the 21 PLC sessions were coded based on the category of discussion using the Community of Inquiry framework (CoI) (Garrison et al., 2000). The qualitative analysis revealed that the most frequent topics discussed fell into the teaching presence category. One in vivo code was added during the analysis of "writing."

This code emerged because of the multiple conversations around the writing skills of students and integrating writing supports within the program. Table 3 displays the code frequencies across the 21 PLC session note documents:

*Table 3*

### **Code Frequencies in PLC Meeting Notes**

<b>Code</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Teaching Presence	69
Technology Topics	38
Social Presence	34
Cognitive Presence	31
Writing	8

#### *Validation*

The main source of validation for the qualitative analysis was member checking (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). While the facilitator was taking notes during the sessions, the note taking frame included the categories within the Col Framework. At the end of each PLC session the facilitator shared her screen with the notes and confirmed with the participants the appropriate categories. This approach was purposeful to ensure each participant felt comfortable with the session notes and the member checking process (Candela, 2019). Given the subsequent discussion, notes were supplemented or moved into other categories based on participant feedback. Finally, after each PLC meeting, the notes were sent to all faculty members for confirmation and any additional feedback. The goal of this member checking (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) process was to ensure the facilitator captured the conversations correctly. The categorized notes were then coded accordingly.

#### *Teaching Presence*

As defined by the Col, teaching presence is the “design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes” (Anderson et al., 2001, p. 5). As this transition to online teaching was primarily the first time for many of the faculty within the special education and elementary education department, discussions around teaching presence in online learning can be expected, and therefore was most frequently discussed (69). Topics ranged from grading tips, feedback banks, rubrics, asking reflective questions, and more. This topic also highlighted the community that was developed with the PLC. For example, during one session faculty had an in-depth discussion around student and professor stress and its impact on learning.

#### *Technology Topics*

Technology topics – ranging from technology issues, strategies, and new tools – was the second most popular topic within the PLC sessions (38). Faculty shared their expertise as questions arose. There were demonstrations on embedding activities within the learning management system, the gradebook, and updates to the editing tool bar. They also discussed the impacts and their experiences with a new virtual reality teaching platform. Since the university offered three different video streaming services, faculty were also able to listen to others’ experiences and evaluate the pros and cons of each as they were choosing the appropriate tool for their course. During one PLC, the whole session focused on accessibility and providing closed captions during video streaming classes.

#### *Social Presence*

The next most frequent category discussed was social presence and establishing an online learning community (34). The topics categorized within this code included virtual office hours, discussions around social justice and racism, social learning in online classes, classroom discussions, etc. For example, one faculty member shared a strategy she uses in her graduate classes on Autism Spectrum Disorders on creating “People Files.” She used a

Google Form for students to share information about themselves. Through this activity students found commonalities and they were sorted in break out rooms based on those commonalities to promote connections within an online class. She also explained that this strategy is also a helpful teaching strategy within the special education classroom.

### *Cognitive Presence*

The rate of discussion around cognitive presence (31) was similar to social presence. Cognitive presence focuses on engagement and learning of the content. These discussions focused on the utilization of case studies, the creation of sample diagnostic assessments, and sharing instructional resources. One major contribution of the PLC is that faculty decided to create a shared resource of evidence based practices to share with students. Faculty expressed the challenges many students have with locating and identifying evidence based practices. The shared resource was saved in the PLC Microsoft Team for all faculty members to access. Throughout the PLC the resource was updated as additional faculty shared resources.

### *Writing*

Although limited, writing (8) came up in multiple sessions of the PLC. Faculty explained the challenges of focusing class time on grammar and basic professional writing conventions, instead of the specific course content. Faculty discussed the possibility of having a self-paced module or support to review these crucial writing conventions to focus class time on specific educational content.

### **Microsoft Teams PLC**

The virtual PLC meetings, meeting notes, and resources were all organized within Microsoft Teams. The Team was set up as a "Class" and the "Insights" tab was utilized to track faculty interaction with content. Throughout the academic year, there was limited access to the Teams resources. Only two additional faculty members who did not attend any PLC sessions accessed content on the Team. Although faculty reported on the survey that the Teams PLC content was "mostly" helpful, faculty interaction was extremely limited throughout the academic year. This contradiction to the post-survey is a limitation with the current study.

### **Limitations**

The limited sample of faculty within the field of education at a public university impacts the generalization of the findings. Some faculty completed the pre and post survey without attending the PLC sessions. However, since the materials and session notes were available to all faculty, sending the survey to all faculty was purposeful. Also, there was contradicting information regarding accessing the resources within the Microsoft Teams PLC. Some faculty members reported accessing the virtual PLC resources, but that activity wasn't reflected in the report. Finally, the researcher was also a faculty member within the special education department during the research which might have impacted faculty participation.

### **Discussion**

The goal of the study was to explore the impact of a virtual faculty driven PLC during the remote work of the 2020-2021 academic year and to gather information on the implementation of resources discussed at the PLC sessions. The emotional impact of isolation during the COVID-19 is significant for students and university staff (Knight et al., 2021). As faculty lost their physical work community, one of the goals of the virtual PLC was to maintain the sense of community as all faculty members were remote working and teaching online for the first time ever. As the findings demonstrate, the sense of community within the faculty remained the same before and after the PLC series. The researcher hypothesized the sense of community would increase after the PLC sessions; however, a variety of factors might have impacted this result. For example, the PLC time was adjusted twice, but finding a time for full and part time faculty to attend was a challenge. Being unable to attend PLC sessions might have negatively impacted the sense of community for some faculty members. The PLC was also only one aspect of creating a community and the SCI-2 asked the faculty to reflect on the University community as a whole and



many aspects within a community. As the pandemic continued to impact personal and professional lives, maintaining a sense of community is still important for departments and universities to consider as the pandemic continues to alter work and learning environments.

Utilizing the Col framework to analyze meeting notes revealed the concerns for many faculty around their teaching presence in an online environment. Issues of teaching presence were the most prevalent within the PLC sessions, second to technology integration. These findings corroborate those of Ferencz (2017), Seaman (2009), and LaPointe Terosky and Heasley (2015). Ferencz's study investigated the perceptions of online adjuncts with a high sense of community with their university. During focus groups, faculty expressed the continued need for "real-time connections that simulated face-to-face interactions" to create a network of faculty who also work at their university (Ferencz, 2017, p. 14). In Seaman's survey of over 10,700 faculty reported that although the technology infrastructure support from their university was adequate, the recognition and additional support for the increased level of effort for teaching online was lacking (2009). Finally, LaPointe Terosky and Heasley (2015) also found that faculty needed the most support around teaching philosophy and professional identity versus technical challenges. These findings are crucial for universities to consider when continuing to support faculty during the unpredictable nature of teaching during a pandemic. Many universities have focused training on technology implementation and specific "how to" strategies, rather than creating authentic and supportive learning environments for faculty.

Technology integration was discussed, but within an authentic content. Faculty were able to hear from colleagues regarding updates, challenges, and implementation. After conducting a literature review on faculty technology integration, Burch and Mohammed (2019) identified that although there isn't consensus on one approach for technology integration, there is agreement that "the most frequently mentioned barrier was inadequate professional training (Araujo & Luiz, 2015; Bleakley & Mangin, 2013; Merc, 2015; Petersen, Finnegan, & Spenser, 2015; Singh & Hardaker, 2014)" (Burch & Mohammed, 2019, p. 726). Creating a learning community where faculty can learn from their colleagues offers significant benefit to building capacity. As the current study suggests, as faculty feel a sense of community, they are more likely to integrate learning from their PLC into their teaching.

As higher education transitions to a post-pandemic landscape advancing beyond emergency online learning and identifying the access benefits to online learning with the proper training is crucial (Murphy, 2020). Similar to the findings of Bedford and Rossow (2017), the PLC model for the transition to online learning demonstrated benefits in community and knowledge transfer into courses. This research supports existing foundation that faculty PLCs can enhance professional learning and the development of effective online teaching practices.

### **Future Research**

Next steps would be to observe or document evidence of strategies or resources shared within faculty PLCs into faculty practice. Also, identifying a different measurement for sense of community within the university and department environment would enhance the measurement of community impact from a PLC series for full and part time faculty. As faculty members continue to navigate the changing higher education landscape, providing a supportive professional learning platform and investigating its impact on faculty and student learning is important to identify successful factors to improve teaching and learning.

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