

# Informal, Grassroots Online Professional Learning: The Experiences of Teacher Educators



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**Abstract** Teacher educators, charged with teaching teachers, can overlook their own Continuing Professional Learning and Development (CPLD), instead relying on learning through doing the job (Swennen A, Shagrir L, Cooper M. *Becoming a teacher educator: voices of beginning teacher educators*. In: *Becoming a teacher educator*. Springer, Dordrecht, p 91–102, 2009). The unique circumstances of COVID-19 meant that most teacher educators had to act quickly and adapt face-to-face teaching for online delivery. In addition to the challenges posed, this presented opportunities to learn and develop new skills and knowledge. This ranged from fostering small-scale professional learning communities (Wenger E. *Syst Think* 9(5):2–3, 1998) to much wider, informal networks of educators learning from each other. The global education community quickly mobilised and offered online seminars, conferences, and training sessions in ways that had never been seen before.

As teacher educators, we explore our personal experiences of engaging with a wide range of grassroots CPLD (Holme R. *Grassroots teacher professional development: how and why practitioners are taking ownership for their development and learning*. PRACTICE: Contemporary Issues in Practitioner Education. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1080/25783858.2021.1882265>, 2021) during COVID-19. The development and execution of an informal Professional Learning Community (PLC), working to support school teachers, is then analysed using a research method including reflective writing and a nominal group technique interview (Cohen L, Manion L, Morrison K. *Research methods in education*, 7th edn. Routledge, Abingdon, 2013). Common themes from the project and evidence from other informal learning experiences are identified, so other tertiary educators can plan their own CPLD and facilitate online grassroots learning opportunities for their peers and students.

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## 1 Introduction

In early 2020, the unique circumstances of COVID-19 meant many teacher educators had to act quickly and adapt face-to-face teaching for online delivery. For many teacher educators, this was a challenging experience, while others responded as ‘gourmet omnivores’ (Joyce & Showers, 2002) embracing every opportunity to learn and develop their online teaching skills. This was not an equitable situation as many teacher educators already worked online, so they had engaged in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) or networks that are facilitated online. Therefore, for some, the ideas explored in this chapter may not be new. However, the unique situation surrounding COVID-19, specifically the requirement to move teaching online, became an area of common ground between school-based teachers and higher education-based teacher educators. This led to far greater interest in professional learning and networking opportunities by the wider education community, ranging from fostering small-scale professional learning communities (Wenger, 1998) to much wider, informal networks of educators learning from each other.

This chapter explores a case study of the professional learning experiences in which we, two teacher educators based within higher education in Scotland, formed a Professional Learning Community (PLC) for practising teachers and teacher educators, from which tertiary sector educators, including teacher educators, can learn. As all university teaching moved online in March 2020, we had to react and respond quickly. Simultaneously school-based teachers across the world were coping with the same challenges but often had to cope with less experience of delivering teaching online or remotely. We saw this as an opportunity to draw on our own experience and knowledge and share this with school-based teachers by instigating and leading a PLC. It transpired, however, that the sharing of knowledge and expertise was not one-way, and the PLC quickly evolved into what could be defined as a Community of Practice (Wenger, 1998), with ourselves and the participating teachers learning together. We covered topics ranging from equality, diversity, and discrimination, alternative approaches to teaching reading, to approaches to online teaching.

### *1.1 CPLD of Teacher Educators in the Tertiary Setting*

The importance of Continuing Professional Learning and Development (CPLD) for teachers is well documented (Cordingley et al., 2015; Timperley et al., 2008; Weston & Clay, 2018). Despite the importance of teacher learning, some teacher educators may overlook explicit CPLD and instead opt to learn through doing the job (Swennen et al., 2009). This might seem paradoxical, as those immersed in the theory of learning and teaching should be those most likely to engage with this themselves. However, this lack of obvious clear engagement with CPLD may be because teacher educators have embedded this in their practice. It should be acknowledged that,

because the role of a teacher educator is varied (Swennen et al., 2009), the opportunities for professional learning are wide ranging. These can include more formal training, attendance at seminars or conferences, engagement in research activity, publications, or editorial work (Srinivasacharlu, 2019), which do not match the traditional transactional forms of teacher professional development (Kennedy, 2014). With the move to online learning, teacher educators have been presented with a new opportunity to engage in practical and theoretical CLPD utilising experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), as we found through the formation of an online PLC.

## ***1.2 Teacher Educators' Engagement with Online Learning Opportunities During COVID-19***

Prior to COVID-19, we, as teacher educators, engaged with a wide range of self-directed learning (Rogers, 2014), grassroots CPLD (Holme, 2020), and other more formal learning opportunities. At the onset of the pandemic, the global education community quickly mobilised and offered online seminars, conferences, and training sessions to support teachers. For example, in the UK, organisations such as the Teacher Development Trust, ResearchEd, and teacher-led grassroots events, such as TeachMeet and #BrewEd (Holme, 2020), made CPLD freely available for educators. They offered free online interactive webinars, including presentations and panel sessions from influential educators, such as Daniel Willingham and Dylan Wiliam, and discussion groups focussed on effective learning and teaching against the backdrop of the sector-wide move to online learning. Although these events were predominantly aimed at teachers, they were also accessed by school leaders, policymakers, educational consultants, and teacher educators. We were no exception and took advantage of these opportunities to learn alongside colleagues and peers from across the globe.

As this CPLD was all delivered online, and often facilitated via social media, as was the case for the teacher-led conferences like UKEdChat (UKEdChat, 2020) and BrewEd (Egan-Smith & Finch, 2018), engagement with these opportunities presented us with the chance not only to gain new knowledge and understanding but to learn new skills directly applicable to teaching and learning online. The research we discuss later in the chapter identified that we experienced the efficacy of the format, structure, and delivery of these conferences and used these experiences to identify aspects of good practice that we could utilise in our context. Our experiences, and anecdotal evidence from those attending these events, suggested these were largely positive experiences and demonstrated how CPLD for tertiary educators could be developed to engage a wider, broader, truly global audience.

In addition to our experiential learning about learning and teaching online, we both engaged with, and embraced, specific in-house training as provided by our host institution's Centre for Technology and Innovation in Learning, which supports staff with digital tools and services for learning and teaching. As a result of this

informal CPLD, not only were we learners during the in-house training, but we were able to share with our peers our analysis of being consumers of online CPLD and what that might look like in more formal learning situations.

Our engagement with online learning opportunities and the time we could commit to this spurred us to consider how this might be of use to others beyond our students and peers, for example, school-based teacher educators.

## 2 Professional or Teacher Learning Communities

The idea of groups working together, beyond normal professional or organisational boundaries, identified by Wenger (1998) in a range of settings and professions beyond education is termed as Communities of Practice (CoP). In the education sector, this idea has developed over the last two decades to be badged as Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) or Teacher Learning Communities (TLCs). As a result, most experienced educators will be aware of the concept of educators working collaboratively and will have curated their own professional or teacher learning communities. There is a wide body of research literature that presents a positive view of the impact of PLCs and TLCs from authors such as Forde & McMahon (2014), Stoll et al. (2006), and Vescio et al. (2008); in addition, Hargreaves (2003) highlights PLCs to avoid quick fixes or superficial change by building communities of practice that increase and sustain professional skill and capacity.

However, in some cases, these professional learning communities evolve organically and do not follow established boundaries and hierarchies, leading to a blurring of the traditional relationships among internal school groups and their relationship to the wider learning community (Stoll & Louis, 2007).

It was this unstructured, pragmatic model, crossing educational boundaries, that we utilised to extend our own professional learning network, with a conscious eye kept on developing sustainable change in, and application to, practice.

### 2.1 *Online PLC Design and Description*

The PLC was initiated so we could help our own development whilst giving practising teachers support with the move to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, we wanted to understand the issues and adversities that colleagues in schools were facing. In contrast to attending formal training, for online learning, this allowed the learning to have immediate impact for all of us as participants, so was a form of action research (Cohen et al., 2013), where there would be a mutual benefit for the researchers and participants.

The PLC was housed online, using the Microsoft Teams platform, which we all accessed via the National Education Intranet for Scotland (known as GLOW). Members were invited to attend via personal contacts and Twitter, and a range of

materials were made available to anyone that joined the group. Once the PLC was established, regular live webinar style sessions were planned, which we ran weekly for around 90 min each time. Although the PLC group included over 50 registered members, the live sessions were typically attended by fewer than 10 teachers and us.

The online, informal sessions explored a wide range of topics and subjects in a discursive, dialogic, or dialectic manner and facilitated meaningful reflection (Pollard et al., 2014). The specific subject focus was dictated by the attending teachers, but with a key focus on delivering online learning and the use of digital technology, which the teacher educators then researched and planned sessions on for subsequent meetings. As the project continued, some of the participating teachers began to lead sessions drawing on their own expertise, allowing us to learn alongside and from the other participants. This was a key factor in the evolution of the PLC, and topics under discussion ranged from teaching about diversity online, inspired by the Black Lives Matter campaign, to the logistical challenges of remote teaching of outdoor learning during the lockdown, thus providing an impetus for us to access and engage in CPLD on topics with which we were less familiar.

## ***2.2 PLC Impact on Participants***

To evaluate our experiences of the PLC, and learn from this for the future, we utilised written reflective summaries of our experience and then engaged in a facilitated discussion, which was chaired by another tertiary education professional. This was a variation on the nominal group technique (Cohen et al., 2013) and a small-scale group interview (Gibbs, 2012). As we were the focus of the research, this qualified as informed consent and initial discussions focussed on our learning experience, with the interview process developing inductively (Cohen et al., 2013). The discussions were recorded (using video software), and the transcript was analysed, alongside the reflective summaries, by us both to identify key themes. Although we were the focus of the study and were attempting to understand our learning, we also drew on anecdotal evidence of the positive experiences of the participating teachers, whilst being conscious of being objective and avoiding potential bias towards being overly positive about the project.

## ***2.3 Learning from the PLC for Tertiary Educators***

The main finding from this study was how we developed knowledge and experience of learning and teaching online. Whilst we undertook learning about teaching online from formal in-house training, informal CPLD opportunities, and from experiencing what it was like to be a learner in an online environment, it was not until we had to dig deeper into our own understanding to be able to support others in contextualising learning and teaching online in their environment, that we truly began to

appreciate the similarities and differences between online learning and teaching and in-person learning and teaching.

A key aspect, which is important in both the online and in-person environment, is explicitly attending to the development of relationships. In an online environment, this is more challenging because of the lack of visual cues or not being able to have incidental or informal interactions; however, as individuals are sitting on their own in front of a computer, building relationships and developing a rapport and a sense of community is probably more important in the online space.

Additionally, our reflections resulted in several sub-findings:

- The importance of being free to engage outside normal systems or hierarchies
- The impact of the size and scale of the PLC
- The impact of the differing experiences and learning of the teacher educators

This learning provides valuable insights for other tertiary educators, especially those planning to utilise a PLC approach for their own and colleagues' learning.

Initially those involved (both us and other PLC participants) had time to develop and build relationships as there was no formal requirement to complete activities or tasks for the PLC. This is different from the one-off formal CPLD, which, it could be argued, is not actually 'continuing' at all. This lies at the transactional end of the professional development (PD) spectrum and is common across the education sector (Kennedy, 2014). In contrast, this relational factor gave all those involved the time to learn and to understand the challenges, e.g. technology issues that others were facing, which enhanced the sense of community. This led to a feeling that, although circumstances were different for everyone, people were doing what they could. This encouraged us to invite participants to ask questions and be more likely to admit where they needed support. This may be a challenge for some working in tertiary or higher education, especially if time is limited and external performance metrics are being imposed, and so it is essential leaders and managers provide this space.

By engendering a sense of community and building relational trust, participants felt they could share their concerns and challenges, which enabled us to gain an authentic view of the teachers' experiences and what development and training were needed. In a normal lecture-based situation, tertiary educators may assume everything is progressing positively, although this may not be a reality because students may be reluctant to say when they are struggling. Within the PLC, as the relationships developed, we felt more comfortable prompting and challenging the other participants. For future this has shown how we must be prepared to work at building relationships before expecting authentic and honest discussion.

Further developing this point, the fact that the PLC operated beyond the typical hierarchical systems appeared to allow trust to develop quickly, which was further enhanced when all participants, including the teacher educators, demonstrated mutual vulnerability (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Those involved in tertiary education must ensure that students have faith in their own expertise, knowledge, and skills but be aware that some students may be wary of openly acknowledging a lack of knowledge. As the PLC developed, we became more willing to embrace this lack

of knowledge, encouraged by the community, less hierarchical, relationship and thereby deepen our learning. A challenge for tertiary educators is to embrace the community element and resist the urge to compete and be 'the expert'.

We identified the importance of the size and scale of the PLC as being a crucial factor. The online group included over 50 members, but fewer than 10 joined us for each 'live' session. Some participants only joined one or two sessions, whereas others became regular attendees and contributors. Initially for us, this was slightly disappointing; however, the commitment shown by the regular participants, and their willingness to contribute, showed that these activities do not necessarily need to be 'big', and the smaller more personal nature of the group enabled it to develop quickly from a 'them and us' situation to 'us' (linking to the point above about relationships).

For those working in tertiary education, especially with large cohorts of students, the importance of developing relationships cannot be underestimated, and the message may be to start small and develop PLCs or CoPs for a specific purpose, to begin the relationship-building process. This is explained by Social Presence Theory (Short et al., 1976) and the relevance of intimacy amongst participants. Furthermore, Tu (2000) argues that privacy or the perception of privacy is an important factor. The closed nature of the group may have allowed this to develop more quickly, critically for ourselves, but also for the other participants.

A final point to note from this case study was the way in which we both had slightly different experiences of embracing learning. For one of us the requirement to research and learn new topics, beyond their area of expertise, to share with the PLC created some pressure, whereas for the other this was motivation. Within higher education, and the tertiary sector, practitioners often encounter imposter syndrome (Bothello & Roulet, 2018); therefore, it is essential that anyone utilising the PLC approach acknowledges the concerns and anxiety that individual members may face. The key factor of community, discussed earlier, may help address this as the PLC develops and becomes established. One thing we both had in common was that we recognised how the PLC encouraged us to investigate and learn about new ideas, subject areas, and teaching approaches, in particular online methods and tools. For others working in the tertiary sector, this highlights the value of engaging and embracing informal CPDL as it can provide the opportunity to both broaden and deepen professional development and learning.

## ***2.4 Impact of the PLC in Tertiary Educator CPLD***

Through the development of this PLC, and learning from other informal CPLD opportunities, we benefited in several ways. We already had experience of leading professional learning but little experience of doing this online. The requirement to navigate and learn more about online learning provided a genuine long-term, positive impact. For those engaged in online tertiary education, this illustrates the potential benefit of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) where there is more focus on the



process rather than the product of learning. To do this effectively, those involved may have to consider their own attitudinal development, which is often overlooked with traditional CPLD (Evans, 2014).

Although we formed the PLC with the initial aim of supporting teachers, it quickly evolved into an opportunity for everyone to learn from each other. We immediately recognised that the project presented a chance to learn and develop knowledge and skills. The biggest impact has been our shift in perception that the teacher education process does not need to be hierarchical. This was helped by the fact that the group was informal and ran alongside online teaching of pupils (in the case of the teachers) and preservice education students (in the case of us as teacher educators). The informality of the group, coupled with the need to learn quickly (due to the pressure of COVID-19), meant less focus on formal learning outcomes giving freedom to explore areas that mattered to all the participants.

As the first UK lockdown ended in late 2020, the teachers returned to teaching in their schools and the PLC was paused. However, after a short time, the group reconvened and were able to provide further support to each other, but rather than focusing on learning, the function of the PLC was to provide a safe space in which to air anxieties and frustrations and seek advice. For us, this was a valuable opportunity to maintain the relationships and gain valuable insight into how the teachers were coping and applying learning from the PLC. The PLC continues to operate in a less formal manner, with one of the major benefits that it has allowed us to continue with our own informal learning. This highlights that this learning has indeed been continuous, and not a one-off experience that sometimes is the case with tertiary education professional development.

### 3 Recommendations for Successful Online CPLD

Although our discipline is teacher education, the general lessons learnt could be applied to other subject areas including educational psychology, health studies, and social work, specifically where a sense of community and collaboration is key. In addition, tertiary educators in unrelated sectors, for example, natural science, business, or law, could adopt the recommendations from this example. All the key findings are general and therefore transferable elsewhere regardless of the tertiary or higher education subject specialism.

First, the issue of permission or control – including the reduction of the risk of doing things ‘wrong’ and removal of formality and hierarchy – should be factored in when planning for professional learning. This requires tertiary educators to reflect and, if necessary, challenge themselves and their beliefs. The online nature of delivery may reduce the feeling of hierarchy and formality and additionally may provide previously unavailable access to professional learning that is relevant, motivating, and engaging for individuals. Put more informally, tertiary educators, from all sectors, are encouraged to embrace the chance to learn and become ‘gourmet omnivores’ of CPLD (Joyce & Showers, 2002).



In addition, all the participants and facilitators in online PLCs need time and space to foster relationships and develop effective approaches to delivery alongside relevant content. A better understanding of theory, such as Social Presence (Short et al., 1976), could facilitate this. Ultimately the message here, especially for educational managers and administrators, is to encourage honest reflection that informs planning and to trust the participants to lead the learning. This may sit at odds within some sectors (e.g. medicine and business studies) where staff are under pressure, and who are ‘time poor’. Therefore, it is more important that those facilitating let go of their own personal agenda, giving time for participants to have genuine ownership over their learning. It is important, as this case study shows, to have some degree of structure, in this case provided by the GLOW intranet site, and clear aims and objectives. However, this should not be overly complex, or restrictive, as it may discourage active participation.

Our own experiences detailed in this chapter have shown that genuine two-way collaboration is required; otherwise, there is the potential not only to stagnate development but to damage it to the extent it regresses (Bevins & Price, 2014). Collaborators must live their principles, *walking the walk*, rather than simply *talking the talk*, requiring time and effort to foster trusting relationships that lead to genuine collaboration.

A further consideration when fostering learning communities or networks is for all participants to remain objectively critical about their relationships and continue to challenge themselves and each other. By engaging in this critical relational edge, participants are less likely to do what they have always done and maintain the comfortable, possibly uncritical, status quo (McArdle & Coutts, 2010) and for PLCs to become echo chambers. Cultivating a critical eye may come naturally to educators linked to certain professions or subjects, such as natural sciences or philosophy, but for others, they may need to examine their own epistemological and ontological positions.

In conclusion, the formation of a PLC can provide impetus, and in some ways the permission, to actively engage with CPLD. Even though all participants were juggling personal circumstances, such as home-schooling their own children whilst teaching online, they appreciated the opportunity to collaborate in a less pressured environment. This was facilitated by a sense of genuine ownership and a sense of belonging to the PLC; for anyone attempting to encourage this model of online CPLD, this may be the biggest challenge. For those in the tertiary sector leading online CPLD, consideration should be given to how opportunities to develop and evolve are encouraged, as well as how to ensure engagement in the learning process is continuous and never-ending.

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