

Planning Guide for Professional Learning Communities in Libraries



This guide is designed to help you plan and establish a Professional Learning Community at your library or library system. You can use this guide to plan sessions as you begin to establish a Professional Learning Community with library staff in your library or library system.

Introduction

In our Autism Ready Libraries research and in our focus groups, we have consistently heard from librarians that in addition to training, they would also appreciate the ability to learn and practice with one another in the community. Librarians valued the time to hear from one another during the focus groups and wanted more opportunities to hear what other people were trying at their library. As one librarian shared during a focus group,

“I think it's helpful just when we have times like this where we can all come together... so we can see and hear what other libraries that aren't in our area are doing... and it's really valuable for me to hear what you're doing in terms of children with autism, in terms of all kinds of different types of programming.”

Another participant observed,

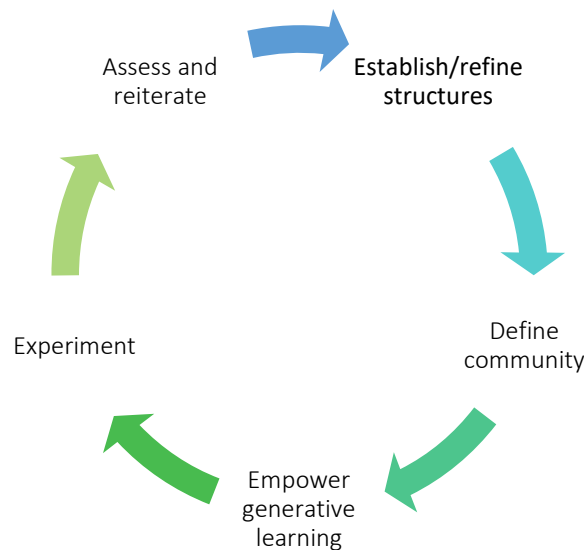
“I feel like longer term training cohorts like that, that last at least two months with the same group of people that are in that cohort, it gives you enough time to feel comfortable around others and learn how you communicate with them as well and get a wide variety of perspectives from throughout either the country or the state....There are frequently things that you did not think of that someone else is working with or ideas that might come from a separate library sector.”

Librarians appreciated trainings but desired the opportunity to learn from one another and hear about both successes and failures, in order to further improve their own practices and their library's services and programs. With this desire in mind, we created this planning guide to help librarians begin and maintain their own peer learning communities.

Professional learning communities (PLCs) and their focus on sustained, collaborative learning are one method for extending learning beyond training sessions into an iterative, and collaborative process of learning and inquiry. For librarians working to increase the capacity for autism-inclusive services and programs, PLCs enable sustained professional development centered around a community that is focused on sharing best practices and establishing new autism-inclusive initiatives in libraries. For example, a PLC with youth librarians from across a library system may decide to focus their efforts on early-literacy efforts and creating autism-inclusive storytimes. Or a group of interested librarians and library staff might begin a PLC to learn with community members and improve library services for autistic patrons. By establishing a professional learning community, library leaders can develop a community to share best practices and generative learning, support autism inclusion efforts across the organization, and create a sustainable form of professional development for interested librarians and staff.

For library leaders interested in establishing a professional learning community, we suggest an iterative process of five key elements that enable continuous improvement and support for communities to evolve as they grow, mature, and change. These five elements are establishing necessary structures, defining the community, empowering generative learning, experimenting, and assessing and reiterating (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Five Essential Elements for developing and maintaining PLCs








These elements are not linear steps and in fact, they may often overlap. Additionally, these elements may look different from one community to another. For example, in communities that have already established a culture of collaboration or have participated in professional development as a group previously, generative learning may begin earlier than in communities that are newly established and working to build relationships among members. Together these five elements will help libraries develop and maintain a PLC at whatever pace is appropriate to the community.

How to Use This Guide

This guide is designed to help you plan and establish a professional learning community at your library or library system. You can use this guide to plan sessions as you begin to establish a PLC in your library or library system. This guide introduces the five essential elements of PLCs, provides a checklist to guide decision-making as you begin planning for a PLC, outlines a structure for each PLC meeting or session, and provides a sample timeline of sessions for a PLC. Every PLC is different, so you may want to revise and adapt these suggestions as needed for your community. Additional resources are listed at the end of the guide for further reading.

The Five Essential Elements of Professional Learning Communities

The first essential element for developing a new PLC is **establishing the necessary support structures** for the community. Support structures can come in many forms, including physical (such as a place to meet, whether virtual or in-person) and relational (such as a culture of collaboration and mutual respect). The second essential component for a successful PLC is **defining the community**, including the mission, values, and learning goals of the PLC community. The third component for an effective PLC is **empowering generative learning** as the community engages in collaborative learning and inquiry. By empowering generative learning, community leaders can help librarians build on their existing knowledge and expertise through feedback and engagement with their peers. **Experimentation** is the fourth essential element for PLCs in libraries, so librarians can experiment with bringing new knowledge, practices, and ideas into their own work. The fifth essential element is to **assess and reiterate**, which involves continuing the process of collective learning and inquiry, as well as assessing the effectiveness of the community itself thus far. Collectively, community members will assess their progress toward their goals, identify new or unmet needs, establish new goals, and determine new areas for learning and inquiry. With this feedback, the community could refine how it functions and revise its focus as necessary to continue the iterative process of collaborative learning.

1		Establish and refine structures Administrators and facilitators organize physical structures, like a time place to meet, and relational structures, such as defining the roles of members and fostering collaboration.
2		Define community The community works together to articulate the mission, important shared values, and goals for learning and inquiry of the PLC.
3		Empower Generative Learning PLC leaders and facilitators can encourage generative learning, where learners build on provided information, by supporting both group and individual learning, creating opportunities for reflection, and incorporating peer-learning and feedback.
4		Experiment Participants try out new knowledge and practices, make adjustments and refinements to the work of the PLC, and try again as they incorporate new ideas into their own work.
5		Assess and Reiterate Together the community reviews the mission and effectiveness of the community, makes necessary revisions, and sets new or revised goals for continued learning.

A Checklist for Creating a PLC at Your Library

Library and community leaders can use this checklist to assist with the planning process for creating and maintaining PLCs in libraries. The checklist uses the five essential elements and provides additional information on what the community will need to decide or consider. You may want to add to or revise this checklist as needed for your library and your community.

Establish and Refine the Necessary Structures

- Determine where, when, and how often the community will meet.** Following a consistent rhythm for meetings helps members stay engaged and available. The community will need to consider questions like, will meetings be in-person or virtual, or a combination? Who will manage the calendar and send invites?
- Identify how the community will share leadership responsibilities.** Some PLCs are led by one facilitator while in others, members take turns. You will need to determine who will be the initial facilitator, if members will take turns leading sessions, and if so, how will that be managed, and who will be responsible for creating notes or minutes for each meeting or session.
- Determine how the community will document and share information.** The community will need a space for sharing and storing information, like readings or meeting notes, whether through a website, social media, mailing list, or other form of communication. Additionally, someone will need to be responsible for adding or updating this information.
- Identify what library administrators or other leaders will do to support the community.** Administration and library leadership may provide support by enabling staff to take time away from other responsibilities to participate, or by providing an appropriate space for sessions. Generally, however, administrators should not take on formal leadership roles within the PLC.

Define the Community

- Determine what the community should know about professional learning communities.** Initially it can be helpful for all interested community members to learn about PLCs and build shared knowledge about the benefits to this approach to professional development. For example, sharing a reading and holding a discussion can introduce the community to the benefits of PLCs and build a foundation for developing a common sense of purpose.
- Collaboratively define the mission of the PLC.** Through small group discussions, members can determine whose needs the community will address, what those needs might be, and how the community might attempt to address them.
- Identify relevant values that are shared among the community members and the organization.** Shared values provide a common ground situated in beliefs and behaviors. These values may connect to the mission of the library, the strategic plan, or the profession itself. Together the community can then determine what attitudes,

behaviors, and commitments everyone is ready to make to foster a more autism-inclusive library.

- Outline the learning and inquiry goals of the community.** Establishing clear goals allows the PLC to determine how to proceed and how to measure progress. The community can consider questions such as, what do we hope to accomplish? What steps are necessary for us to achieve this? What might we need to learn to carry out this work? How can we increase our capacity for this work?

Empower Generative Learning

- Support both individual and group learning.** Individual and collaborative learning can be messy and complicated, so the PLC will need to provide intentional support for both individual and group learning activities.
- Provide opportunities for reflection in meetings or sessions.** PLC sessions should include opportunities for learners to reflect on their learning, consider how they might apply new strategies or practices, or revisit their attempts to apply their learning in their professional work.
- Incorporate peer learning into the learning of the community.** Peer learning includes sharing experience or knowledge, as well as peer input or feedback. For example, a librarian might volunteer to share their experiences with creating visual schedules for storytimes, and in a later session other community members could report back on their attempts at using visual schedules and receive suggestions from their peers.

Experiment

- Encourage participants to try out new practices in their own work.** Enacting new ideas and practices in one's own context often requires making adjustments and trying again, so normalizing this process will help the community feel more confident throughout their experimentation.
- Create expectations for constructive suggestions and feedback.** The community can work to outline clear guidelines for feedback, and individuals may want to ask for specific kinds of feedback. Knowing what to expect will help everyone participate more fully in peer feedback sessions.

Assess and Reiterate

- Determine what worked well for the community.** The community should evaluate the effectiveness of the PLC and identify what they would like to keep doing in the PLC.
- Determine what didn't work well for the community.** As PLCs evolve, there is always room for improvement, so the community should identify what hasn't worked well or what they would like to stop doing.
- Revise or refine how the PLC functions.** Community leaders could conduct a survey of members, create a space for members to suggest improvements, or facilitate a discussion of ideas for improving the PLC.

- ❑ **Update existing learning goals or create new learning goals.** As the community reflects on its progress, it may be necessary to revise the focus of the PLC or create a new focus for the process of collaborative learning.

Providing A Consistent Structure for Each PLC Session

In addition to making use of the five elements, PLCS leaders will also need to provide a consistent structure for each PLC. Creating a consistent plan and rhythm for PLC sessions will help everyone know what to expect and make effective use of the time allotted. We suggest using a five-step structure, drawn from the work of Wald and Castleberry (2000), that moves participants through inquiry and learning into action and reflection. These five steps encourage communities to **recap, define, explore, experiment, and reflect and plan**. Ideally, each session would incorporate both individual and group activities. Facilitators for each session will need to determine whether the session will include a presentation, discussion of shared readings, or include some other form of learning, such as a workshop or demonstration. Sessions conclude with key takeaways and a preview of the next session.

A Five-Step Structure for Every PLC Session

Recap	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remind participants what was discussed or covered in previous session • Provide a clear schedule or agenda for the session
Define	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Define the goals for the session
Explore	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take in new ideas or information • Discuss the new information and connect to existing knowledge or experiences
Experiment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage in group activities to try out the new ideas or practices • Offer suggestions or feedback to peers
Reflect and Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guide members through reflecting on their learning during today's session • Encourage members to make their own plan of action for enacting new ideas or practices before the next session • As a group, review the plan for the following session

Planning a Series of PLC Sessions

Each community will learn and grow at their own pace and in their own way. Community leaders will need to determine the appropriate pacing and content for each session, and plan to create ongoing sessions that support continuous learning and growth. Below is a sample timeline to help leaders consider what types of sessions they might need to include to establish and sustain their community. The timeline is general in nature, to allow facilitators to adapt this schedule to the needs and learning goals of their community.

A Sample Timeline for a Series of PLC Sessions

Session 1	Building shared knowledge of PLCs (such as through a reading and discussion)
Session 2	Co-defining the mission of the community
Session 3	Identifying shared values that support the community's mission
Session 4	Establish learning and inquiry goals
Session 5	Introduce first new learning material and activities
Session 6	Community members report back on their experiences applying new knowledge, and receive peer suggestions and feedback
Session 7	Introduce or share additional new knowledge and/or practices
Session 8	Community members report back on their experiences applying new knowledge, and receive peer suggestions and feedback

Depending on the size and membership of the community, some of these discussions may require more than one session. For example, a community might need two sessions to establish learning goals: one that focuses on identifying whose needs and which needs the group would like to address, and a second to determine how the group would like to address those needs. Community leaders should remain aware of the needs of the community and adjust the plan as needed. Remaining flexible and responsive to the community and their learning process will create an environment where learning and engagement is prioritized, which will allow more authentic participation for each member. Remember that the main goal of any PLC is not speed or rapid change, but rather intentional learning, collaborative inquiry, and iterative professional growth.

Next Steps

By design, professional learning communities incorporate peer learning with intentional inquiry in a cycle of continuous improvement. For librarians who want to learn more about autism-inclusion in libraries, PLCs can enable ongoing professional development within a community focused on sharing best practices and establishing new autism-inclusive initiatives in libraries. Establishing and sustaining a new PLC does require time and effort, but library leadership can support these efforts by prioritizing time for professional development and fostering collaboration and trust within the community.

Within this planning guide are the basic elements library leaders can use to implement a PLC within their library or library system. This guide is designed to help you get started with that process, but you and your community may also desire more in-depth information. You can refer to the References and Additional Resources section below for materials that can be shared within the community or used by community leaders in developing and sustaining a new PLC.

References and Additional Resources

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