



# Professional Learning Community (PLC) Quick Start Guide

This resource aims to support educators as they engage in collaborative inquiry cycles within professional learning communities during implementation of the [Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy](#). Examples provided will focus on middle- and high-school settings; however, educators at *any level* can use this guide to support effective implementation of professional learning communities focused on the Essential Practices documents found at <https://literacyessentials.org/>. Educators wishing to use this as a workbook are encouraged to make a copy of this document prior to recording individual or group reflections.

This guide provides step-by-step instructions that educators working in PLC's can follow over the course of a semester or entire school year to develop and/or improve their implementation of specific disciplinary literacy instructional practices. The time it takes a PLC to work through a cycle will vary depending upon multiple factors (size of team, frequency and duration of meetings, etc.). PLC's should seek to strike a balance between taking time to be thoughtful and deliberate while also pushing themselves to move forward and make reasonable progress on their goals.

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Key:  Read

 Write

 View

 Discuss



<https://literacyessentials.org/>



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### What Are Professional Learning Communities?



A Professional Learning Community, or *PLC*, is a group of educators that meets regularly, shares expertise, and works collaboratively to improve teaching skills and the academic performance of students. The term is also applied to schools or teaching faculties that use small-group collaboration as a form of professional development. Shirley Hord, an expert on school leadership, came up with perhaps the most efficient description of the strategy: “The three words explain the concept: Professionals coming together in a group—a community—to learn.”

Professional learning communities tend to serve two broad purposes: (1) improving the skills and knowledge of educators through collaborative study, expertise exchange, and professional dialogue, and (2) improving the educational aspirations, achievement, and attainment of students through stronger leadership and teaching. Professional learning communities often function as a form of action research—i.e., as a way to continually question, reevaluate, refine, and improve teaching strategies and knowledge. Meetings are goal-driven exchanges facilitated by educators who have been trained to lead professional learning communities. Participation in meetings may be entirely voluntary, and in some schools only a small percentage of the faculty will elect to participate, or it may be a school-wide requirement in which all faculty members participate.

From <https://www.edglossary.org/professional-learning-community/>



“It is important to understand that a professional learning community is not a faculty, grade level, or department meeting. A PLC is also not a school committee, such as one set up to decide on a new academic program. These types of learning environments may include individuals with a shared vision, but a PLC is more aligned with continuous improvement over time.”

From '[A Professional Learning Community Is Not a Faculty, Grade Level, or Department Meeting](#)' (Opinion)



Reflection: How would you define “professional learning community” in your own words? What knowledge or experience do you have related to PLCs?

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### Why Participate In Professional Learning Communities?



When implemented effectively, professional learning communities:

- Foster an improvement mindset
- Engage teachers in a cycle of inquiry (see the sections that follow for more on inquiry cycles)
- Are guided by our discussion protocol ensuring equitable and collaborative participation
- Encourage reflection on group processes and norms
- Focus on research-based instructional practices
- Use data to ground discussions
- Promote teacher choice, agency, and voice

From [Using Inquiry Cycles in PLCs to Improve Instruction](#)



There is a substantial research base showing a positive impact on teacher practice through effective implementation of all components of PLCs. Some of that research is cited [here](#). In addition, substantial research found that when implemented to a high level, PLCs had an impact on teachers' instructional practices **and** student achievement.

From [Professional Learning Communities \(PLC\) Strategy Guide - Archived | CDE](#)



Reflection: From the possible reasons to participate in a professional learning community, which one(s) feel most relevant to you? Why?

### What Are Collaborative Inquiry Cycles?



What are collaborative inquiry cycles? What are the stages and how do they work together?  
<https://youtu.be/brBce5STwWA>

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Reflection: Different researchers and educators may use different terms for the stages or steps of an inquiry cycle, and they may name a different number of stages. Regardless, how might you describe collaborative inquiry cycles to a colleague?

### Why Engage In Collaborative Inquiry Cycles?



Why might educators engage in collaborative inquiry? <https://youtu.be/OUEiiUuKCkk>



Examples from *Collaborative Inquiry for Educators*:

#### Example 1

What: "This year, teachers will conduct collaborative inquiry while participating in a professional learning community."

How: "Forty minutes a week will be structured into your schedule. Teachers in the same division will share common time in which they will come together to investigate an issue stemming from an identified common student-learning need."

Why: "As a result of our collaboration, we will all be better equipped to address the learning needs of our students." (Donohoo, 2013)

#### Example 2

Why: "I believe that students deserve the very best education, but they come to us with gaps in their

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understanding, and that makes it difficult and challenging for educators to meet the diverse needs of all learners.”  
 How: “We can work together to identify the gaps in our knowledge based on identified student learning needs. Collaboratively, we can learn about different approaches, identify strategies to test them, assess their impact, and revise them accordingly.”

What: “Collaborative inquiry is an approach for teacher development and learning, and it provides a structure where teachers and administrators come together to continuously seek and share learning and then act on what they have learned.”

“Disciplinary literacy, as a newer area of research and set of instructional practices, is less well understood than other areas of literacy research and instruction, such as vocabulary or phonics instruction. As a result, learning to teach disciplinary literacy requires teachers to tackle an *adaptive change*” (Heifetz et al., 2009 as cited in Ippolito et al., 2019). Adaptive changes require invention, flexibility, and multiple possible ways of being right. Collaborative inquiry is one way for educators to use invention, flexibility, and multiple possible ways of being right in order to investigate shared areas of interest and learning.



Reflection: In your own words, describe some of the benefits of engaging in collaborative inquiry cycles within a PLC.

### How Can PLCs Get Started With Collaborative Inquiry Cycles?

#### Step One: Understanding the Social and Emotional Shifts



“MacDonald (2011) described a “culture of nice” as the underlying culture that inhibits the team from reaching a level of rigorous collaborative discourse where teachers are challenging each other’s and their own thinking, beliefs, assumptions, and practice...teachers must be willing to expose their struggles and failures with their colleagues, and colleagues must be willing to tell the truth, or teams will go through the motions of collaborative inquiry but never see results.” (MacDonald as cited in Donohoo, 2013)



Understand the elements of effective teams:

1. Psychological safety (the most important feature of an effective team)

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2. Dependability (they could count on each other to produce high-quality work on time)
3. Clarity (goals, roles, and execution plans were clear)
4. Meaning (the work was personally important to everyone on the team)
5. Collective efficacy (they believed they had an impact)

From *Collaborative Inquiry for Educators*



Reflection: In your context, what might be some of the social and emotional challenges that could arise among colleagues as you begin to participate in professional learning communities? How might a “culture of nice” make this process difficult? What support might be needed from leaders in order to address some of these challenges and develop the elements of an effective team?

### Step Two: Setting Up Structures For Success



#### Principals:

- Prioritize improvement work
- Ensure regular PLC meetings
- Set norms and expectations

#### Instructional Coaches:

- Support PLC discussions
- Train team leads
- Provide data collection tools

#### PLC Team Leads:

- Facilitate PLC discussions
- Support their teams’ inquiry process
- Meet to share change ideas

#### PLC Team Members:

- Contribute to PLC discussions
- Participate in their team’s inquiry process
- Meet to share change ideas
- Rotate roles during PLC meetings



The [Essential School-Wide Practices in Disciplinary Literacy](#) describe the organizational structures that are necessary when effectively implementing disciplinary literacy in secondary settings. The [Schoolwide Screening Tool](#) supports leadership teams in assessing their current state and prioritizing areas for continuous improvement. PLCs can leverage these valuable resources to help shape the processes they develop.

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Reflection: Which organizational practices from the School-Wide Practices document might be most helpful to you as you begin to participate in professional learning communities? How might you contribute to continuous improvement in those areas?



Consider using the [Norms of Collaboration](#) as a tool in this process. These seven norms of collaboration, offered by Adaptive Schools (now [Thinking Collaborative](#)) are widely used in multiple settings and name essential capacities and skills for high-performing groups. They help groups to develop shared meaning and gracefully reach decisions.



Reflection: Which of the Norms of Collaboration are strengths of your current PLC? Which ones might be areas for continued growth? How might you keep the Norms of Collaboration (or any other norms developed by your PLC) visible each time the PLC meets?



[Questions to ask](#) when starting disciplinary literacy work—make a copy of the linked document and use the questions to guide PLC conversations. Record key ideas within the document for future reference.



Effective PLCs work from a shared vision... but what does this mean? Watch this video to explore the idea of a shared vision: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lyESvprvRbI>? Consider using [this protocol](#) to help your team develop a shared vision.



Reflection: How might your conversations from the “Questions to Ask” document inform your team’s shared vision? How might you keep the shared vision visible each time the PLC meets? When will you make time to review the vision and revise if necessary?

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Develop a [meeting agenda template](#). Use the linked template or develop your own. This will need to be adjusted as the PLC moves through the collaborative inquiry process.



It is normal for new (and established) PLC teams to hit a few bumps in the road as they are developing norms, shared vision, and processes. Now is a good time to consider [common challenges](#) in professional learning communities and explore ways to overcome those challenges.



Reflection: Which of the challenges are ones you have encountered previously, if any? Which of the suggestions made in the article feel like they will be most helpful for your PLC to keep in mind as you engage in collaborative inquiry cycles?

### Step Three: Drafting the Area of Inquiry



“A well-framed problem meets the following criteria:

- Is based on identified, current student learning needs
- Is connected to a shared vision
- Addresses an issue individuals can act on and
- Is manageable for the team” (Donohoo)

**ELA Practice 1** example: How do we engage students in asking questions, both literal and conceptual, about the world around them to develop generative thinkers? What impact does use of the Question Formulation Technique have on students’ ability to ask good questions?

**Math Practice 2** example: How do we teach students to critically read and evaluate mathematical explanations, models, arguments, and other relevant types of mathematics texts?

**Science Practice 4** example: How do we explicitly name, describe, and model the dispositions, strategies, and patterns of thinking typical of different forms of science writing? What impact does collaborative writing have on students’ ability to create a scientific article?

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**Social Studies** Practice 5 example: How do we establish compelling reasons for engaging in discussion of text, including texts produced by students? What impact does connecting the reading and discussion of text to a driving question have on student discussion?

**Beyond “the Core”** Practice 7 example: How do we teach multiple meanings or nuanced meanings of a word across different contexts and encourage students to use new words in meaningful contexts (e.g., discussion of texts, discussions of content area learning, semantic maps)? What impact does regular student discussion about vocabulary have on their conceptual development?

The [Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy](https://literacyessentials.org/) from <https://literacyessentials.org/> can help PLCs develop their initial inquiry question. The purpose of this document is to increase Michigan’s capacity to improve adolescents’ literacies by identifying a focused set of research-supported instructional practices that have been shown to increase student achievement and/or engagement with academic literacies. For educators teaching courses other than English language arts, mathematics, sciences, or social studies, this companion document will be helpful: [Disciplinary Literacy Essentials: Beyond the Core](#). Within each of the ten Instructional Practices are bullet points that provide specific suggestions for instruction. After identifying a shared Instructional Practice to consider for collaborative inquiry, teachers might review the bullet points within that practice, consider the strengths and needs of their students, and hone in on one bullet point to craft their area of inquiry.

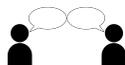
Suggestions for Data on Student Strengths and Needs:

- Classroom observational data
- Student interviews or surveys
- Benchmark assessment data
- Classroom summative assessment data
- Formative assessment data



Reflection: What are some possible inquiry questions that your PLC is considering? What data (qualitative and quantitative) helped you reach those inquiry questions?

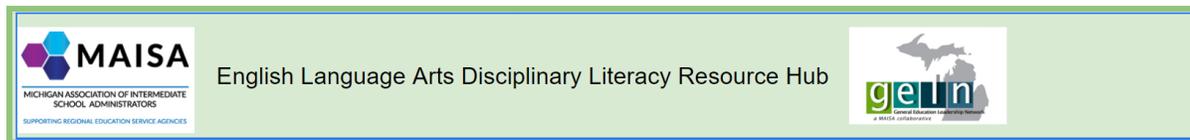
### Step Four: Building Background Knowledge and Refining the Area of Inquiry



What evidence-based resources might provide options for instructional moves we might try in terms of our inquiry question? How might our investigation of research-based approaches help us select our first inquiry question and refine it?

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**ELA Practice 1 example:** How do we engage students in asking questions, both literal and conceptual, about the world around them to develop generative thinkers? What impact does use of the Question Formulation Technique have on students' ability to ask good questions?



The ELA PLC starts by opening this document: [ELA - DLE Resource Hub](#). Because they are interested in Practice 1, they go to the appropriate tab in the document.



Click on **#1 tab** ↗ at bottom of document

Resource Name/Link	Description	Disciplinary Focus	Resource Type	Recommended By (email)
<a href="#">KOED Learn</a>	KOED Learn is a free platform for middle and high school students to tackle big issues and build their media literacy and critical thinking skills in a supportive environment. Brings a new topic every other week to discuss with students inside your classroom and from schools around the country.	Multi-Subject	Website	jenelle.williams@oakland.k12.mi.us
<a href="#">New York Times Learning Network</a>	Articles and resources from around the globe. Additionally, picture prompts, student opinion pieces, writing contests, a full year's writing curriculum, and more.	Multi-Subject	Website	jenelle.williams@oakland.k12.mi.us
<a href="#">PBL Works</a>	Your gateway to the very best in Project Based Learning, no matter where you are in your PBL journey. Here, you will find a growing set of resources to help you design and implement powerful learning in your classroom. Registration is free. Includes resources such as: planning tools, rubrics, student handouts, student materials, etc.	Multi-Subject	Website	jenelle.williams@oakland.k12.mi.us
<a href="#">Right Question Institute</a>	The Right Question Institute offers resources on the Question Formulation Technique, which helps students develop better questions, including questions about texts.	Multi-Subject	Website	stacie.woodward@oakland.k12.mi.us
<a href="#">Compose Our World</a>	This blog focuses on implementing project-based, UDL-aligned approaches in a 9th grade ELA class	ELA	Website	jenelle.williams@oakland.k12.mi.us

Suggested resources and approaches aligned to this practice include the Question Formulation Technique. PLC members have experienced the Question Formulation Technique in professional learning events previously, but they have never tried it with their students. This seems like a promising approach to try.

**Math Practice 2 example:** How do we teach students to critically read and evaluate mathematical explanations, models, arguments, and other relevant types of mathematics texts?

A Math PLC may draft an original inquiry question similar to the one above. However, since this question is still quite broad, they may start by investigating the Practice 2 tab in the Math Resource Hub for inspiration. They might also review elements of their curricular resources. Their investigation helps them land on this refined inquiry question: What impact does explicit modeling of reading strategies have on students' comprehension of math texts?

**Science Practice 4 example:** How do we explicitly name, describe, and model the dispositions, strategies, and patterns of thinking typical of different forms of science writing?

A Science PLC drafted the initial inquiry question above. After reviewing students' scientific writing samples, they notice a wide variety in terms of the overall quality of student writing. Because they have been emphasizing

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collaboration as part of their implementation of NGSS, they decide to try making space for collaborative writing. They refine their inquiry question here: What impact does collaborative writing have on students' ability to create a scientific article?

Keep in Mind:

"There is never a *wrong question*, only questions that lead to other questions!" (Ippolito et al., 2019)

"As long as the goal is not too far out of reach, challenging goals raise motivation for success" (Donohoo & Katz, 2019)



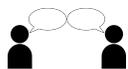
PLC members draft a Theory of Action based on their inquiry question. A Theory of Action often follows this sentence structure: If we...then (outcome)...

Science example: What impact does collaborative writing have on students' ability to create a scientific article? If we explicitly teach students how to engage in collaborative writing and devote time for it in every unit, then the quality of students' individual writing of scientific articles will improve.



Reflection: What is the refined inquiry question your PLC has decided to begin with? What Theory of Action will help you anticipate the impact on students?

### Step Five: Idea Testing and Collecting Evidence



Idea testing is when teachers try out the selected instructional approach (based on PLC conversations around the inquiry question) in their classrooms. Along with idea testing, teachers should discuss how they will collect evidence (artifacts) from the classroom.

Possible questions for PLC members to discuss at this step are as follows:

- What is our timeline to put our plan into action?
- How many times should we use the instructional approach before sharing our evidence with each other? "We recommend trying a new practice at least three or four times before stepping back to analyze potential effects." (Ippolito et al., 2019)
- What artifacts will we collect and share with each other? Artifacts can include instructional materials, student reflections, observational notes, formative assessment data, and more.

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The outcomes of these conversations will help the PLC create a plan of action. This plan can be recorded in the [PLC meeting agenda](#). Keep in mind the following criteria for a well-developed plan:

“A well-developed plan for data collection meets the following criteria:

- Is committed to in writing
- Includes a variety of valid and reliable measures
- Outlines with transparency how the evidence will be collected
- Indicates when the evidence will be collected and by whom
- Ensures a manageable process for collection—given available time and resources” (Donohoo, 2013)

### Step Six: Analyzing Evidence



At this stage in the collaborative inquiry process, PLC members analyze evidence (artifacts) and use evidence to support reflection and idea revision.

Possible questions for PLC members to discuss at this step are as follows:

- How did it go?
- How do we know? Helpful protocols to support discussion on this question include the following:
  - [Consultancy Protocol](#)
  - [Charrette Protocol](#)
  - [Learning From Student Work Form – Reflection – School Reform Initiative](#)
  - [Student Work Context Sheet – School Reform Initiative](#)
- Do we need to stay with this area of inquiry? If so, are there any necessary revisions we should make to our instructional approach or our plan?
- If we feel ready to move onto our next inquiry, what might we explore next?

“...[E]ach teacher and team should openly discuss the duration of a particular inquiry cycle, stay flexible about timing, and keep checking in to make sure that the work feels productive...we have seen teachers engage in as many as five or six inquiry cycles per academic year...we have also seen teachers focus on just one area of inquiry across an entire year.” (Ippolito et al., 2019)

During this stage, it is important to keep the PLC Norms at the forefront. Additional norms to consider are as follows:

- Stay focused on the question or problem.

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- Give balanced feedback that acknowledges strengths as well as gaps in student work and teacher assignments.
- Listen thoughtfully and openly.
- Respect differences and focus on understanding where different opinions and ideas come from.
- Reveal your thinking to others.
- Be reflective, patient, and persistent.
- Look openly and critically at the evidence.
- Look for patterns in the work.
- Be willing to change.

The outcomes of these conversations will help the PLC refine their current plan of action or create a new plan. This can be recorded in the [PLC meeting agenda](#).

### Step Seven: Documenting, Celebrating, and Sharing



It is easy in the business of the school year to neglect the opportunity to celebrate small wins. However, it is vitally important to make space to reflect on successes related to the area of inquiry. It is also important to make these successes visible to other colleagues.



Reflection: In what ways have we grown our instructional practice? In what ways is this positively impacting students? How do these successes energize us to keep moving forward? How might we share our successes with other colleagues?



Use the Characteristics of Collaborative Inquiry (Donahoo, 2013) to reflect on PLC effectiveness and set goals for future inquiry cycles.

#### Collaborative

1. Norms that enable effective collaboration are in place.
2. When meeting as a learning team, our work together is owned by every member of the team.
3. Decision making authority is dispersed among individuals.
4. Diversity of opinion is promoted and evidence in our joint work.

#### Reflective



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5. **Routines** that encourage and enable individuals to consider and reflect on solutions to their problems of practice are in place.
6. Group members consistently use data to self-assess and reflect.
7. Team members are experimenting with new teaching ideas in the classroom and reflecting on how well they are working.
8. Thinking is more intentional and explicit based on reflection.

### Learning Stance

9. Team members not only promote but fully participate in each stage of the collaborative inquiry cycle.
10. Our time together is focused on student learning, professional learning, teaching practice, and/or leading.
11. Team members are open to new ideas and actively seek new information from relevant sources to help inform next steps.
12. Team members find value in the process.

### Process Driven by Practice

13. Our work involves examining our own and each other's practice.
14. We use practice to discover strategies that work.
15. We draw on outside ideas in relation to how they relate to our situation.
16. Work is connected to and impacting the work of the professional learning community and wide school improvement efforts.

### Actions Informed by Evidence

17. Analysis of relevant and current data is deemed important and is an ongoing priority for the team.
18. The team considers teaching practices (in light of student data) and determines approaches that are successful and those that need to be changed.
19. The team considers multiple sources of evidence to gain a well-rounded picture of their inquiry.
20. Current student learning data is collaboratively examined and provides a basis for considering next steps for the team's inquiry.



Reflection: Which elements are strengths of our PLC? How do we know? Which elements represent areas for growth as we engage in another inquiry cycle? What will we do to keep these elements at the forefront?

## Helpful Resources

Admiraal, W. et al. (2019, September 23). Schools as professional learning communities: what can schools do to support professional development of their teachers? *Professional Development in Education*, 47(4), 684-698.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2019.1665573>

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Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators General Education Leadership Network Disciplinary Literacy Task Force (2019) Essential instructional practices for disciplinary literacy: grades 6 to 12 Lansing, MI: Authors

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YouTube. (2014). *Why Collaborative Inquiry?* YouTube. Retrieved August 4, 2023, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OUEiiUuKCKk>

[EduPaths Disciplinary Literacy Courses](#) This FREE, online course series is intended for all secondary educators and instructional leaders looking to learn about the [Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy in the Secondary Classroom: Grades 6 to 12](#) in an effort to improve adolescent literacy in every secondary classroom. The learning activities are specifically designed to support interdisciplinary educator teams, although individual educators are invited to enroll and join as well. Free SCECHs are available.

### [Literacy in the Disciplines Survey Question Bank](#)

The survey questions listed in this document offer teams, departments, schools, and districts an opportunity to gather information on teachers' perceptions of aspects of disciplinary literacy teaching and learning. Survey results can help teams prioritize areas of focus for support and additional professional learning.

### [Literacy in the Disciplines Analysis Protocol](#)

Our objective for examining the data from this survey is to understand secondary educators' perceptions, practices, and professional learning needs regarding literacy in their respective disciplines. Adopted from a National School





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Reform Faculty (NSRF) protocol, the three part process aims to “replace hunches and feelings with data-based facts...and generate ‘root-cause’ discussions that move from identifying symptoms to possible causes.”

[ELA Resource Hub](#)

[Math Resource Hub](#)

[Science Resource Hub](#)

[Social Studies Resource Hub](#)

[Disciplinary Literacy Essentials: Beyond the Core](#)

[Protocols – School Reform Initiative. \(n.d.\). School Reform Initiative. Retrieved August 4, 2023, from https://www.schoolreforminitiative.org/protocols/](https://www.schoolreforminitiative.org/protocols/)

### Evidence Base:

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