



## Professional Learning Communities – Web Enhanced



By Sarah Zykanov

**R**eflection on practice, collaborative lesson planning, examining evidence of student learning, creating common assessments; each of these activities helps teachers define problems, consider options and plan ways to adapt classroom practice to meet the needs of diverse learners. Most educators agree that these activities are important and valuable, but few believe there is enough time in the typical school day to do any of them well.

Schools using the professional learning community (PLC) model find ways to embed at least two focused half-hour meetings per month for PLC meetings in the school schedule (Schmoker, 2006). Meeting protocols that help teacher teams stay focused as they clarify goals and action steps are recommended (Boudett et al, 2005). Teacher teams often need guidance as they learn to work together and then ongoing monitoring and support from school leaders (Dufour et al, 2005).

I propose that one way to contend with time constraints and the need for guidance and monitoring of PLC work is through the use of information and communications technologies (ICT). The following are some examples of ICT that could facilitate PLC work. E-mail and shared calendars can ease coordination of group meetings. Online discussion forums, preferably restricted to school users, can be used to post meeting minutes, goals and action plans. Teachers can reflect on practice and brainstorm new approaches to teaching challenges in

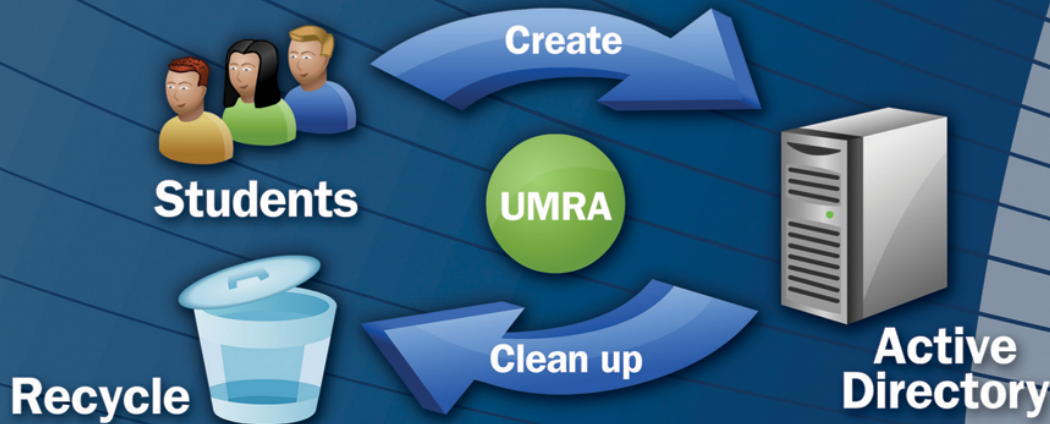
online forums (Whipp, 2003). Web sites or wikis can be used to share teacher created resources and lessons (Sheehy, 2008). Internet-based programs can facilitate collaborative curriculum unit planning (Wiske, 2005). Data systems for creating assessments and analyzing results allow teachers to share information about student learning with ease (Steele & Boudett, 2008). Using ICT would allow teachers to participate in team work at a time and place that is convenient for them. It would also make it easier for principals to monitor and support the work of multiple PLC teams.

There are a number of free online ICT tools that can facilitate teacher collaboration. Most of these tools are simple to set up and easy to use: Google Apps for Education includes a shared calendar, chat, simple video conferencing, teacher and group Web sites and the ability to collaboratively create documents, presentations and spreadsheets. Wikispaces or PBworks are popular wiki sites with free versions for educators. Wikis are simple Web sites for resource sharing and online discussions. Creating a social network using Ning may be an option some school teams wish to consider. A social networking site would allow teachers to create a personal profile page and also support collaborative work. The Galaxy suite from the California K-12 high speed network includes Moodle online course software that could be used to set up a private learning environment for PLC.

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# Cost Effective User Account Management



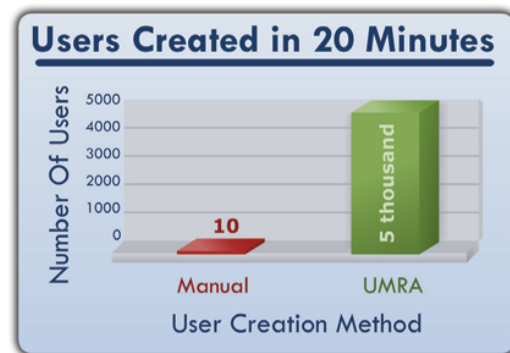
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## Professional Learning Communities

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Teachers working together in online learning spaces should learn about and practice rules of netiquette, interacting online in ways that do not make other participants feel offended or defensive. In a face-to-face discussion, intonation and nonverbal cues help people discern humor or know when someone is offended by a comment. Written communication is permanent so participants need to use words with care. Teams must consider the level of privacy they need. For example, discussions of student work, especially using student names, should not take place in an unrestricted online forum. The tools listed above all allow for various levels

of privacy. Data that must be kept confidential such as student discipline or transcripts should not be recorded in these unencrypted online tools. If the group's primary goal is to share teacher created materials such as units or lessons, teachers can share these on a wiki that is open to the public. Be sure that only group members can publish to the wiki, to avoid posts from unwelcome visitors.

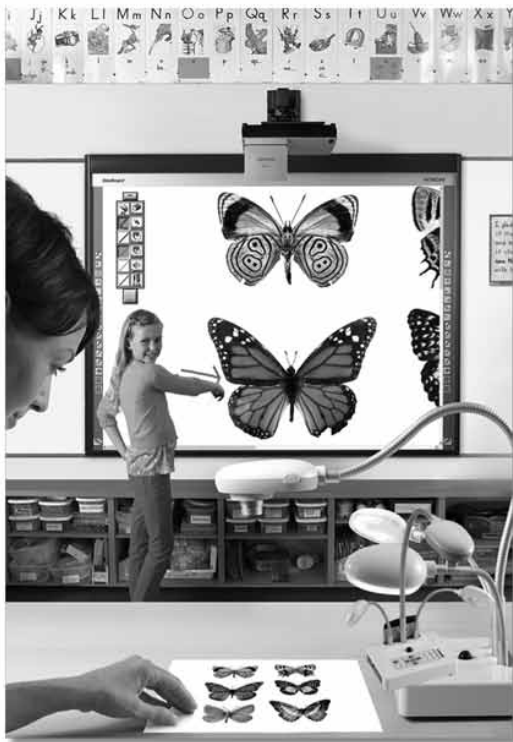
In summary, ICT can facilitate the work of collaborative teacher teams, such as PLC, allowing them to share resources and ideas, and document their work. ICT can allow teachers to participate in team work at a time and place that is convenient for them.

Various free online tools can be explored to determine what will best meet group needs and interests. Attention should be paid to netiquette, confidentiality and privacy. ■

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