

Learning and developing teaching competencies in a Professional Learning Community



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We hope you enjoy reading this report and it gives you valuable insights into the topic of professional learning communities.

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Executive Summary

Context

When the pandemic hit the world, teachers were forced to change their education from onsite to virtual overnight. Understandably, teaching quality decreased in the beginning, as there was little experience in how to adapt the educational design. Zuyd University of Applied Sciences (Zuyd) recognized the problem that teachers were on different didactic and pedagogical levels when it comes to online education. Unfortunately, the pandemic made it hard for teachers to connect with each other. In the Domain of Health and Welfare, this led to the idea of establishing a professional learning community. A professional learning community (PLC) can be seen as an informal group of people who share knowledge and experiences among each other on a common topic they are all highly interested in. Zuyd's vision "passion for development" sets a good basis for the start of such a community.

Steps we took

In order to find out how a professional learning community can look like in Zuyd, the following steps were taken: Firstly, we collected and evaluated literature and best practices around the topic. Based on our findings we developed an interview guideline and conducted interviews with eight teachers from the Domain of Health and Welfare. Throughout the whole report a SWOT analysis was performed with the literature and best practices filling opportunities and threats and the interviews providing content for strengths and weaknesses.

Main findings

From these sources, we derived enablers for a successful learning community, which led to recommendations for Zuyd on how to strategically position, implement and organize a PLC. One of our major recommendations is to make didactic and pedagogical skills an important topic within Zuyd in order to

strategically implement the learning community into Zuyd's strategy. Furthermore, we recommend giving the lead in organizing and facilitating the PLC to the blended learning task force. To collect a diverse set of interested employees to the core group, the educational managers should personally approach teachers that might be interested. The sense of urgency around the topic needs to be addressed regularly through the directors of the Domain, the task force of blended learning, as well as the PLC itself. In this way, interest in the topic of didactic and pedagogical skills and blended learning can be enhanced. In the report we go into greater detail on how to organize and apply these recommendations.

We are convinced that implementing these steps will pay off in the future and will successfully enhance competencies on blended learning and didactic and pedagogical skills through knowledge exchange.

Management Samenvatting

Context

Toen corona ons land binnenkwam moesten docenten noodgedwongen overstappen naar online onderwijs. Dit was een flinke uitdaging en de kwaliteit van het onderwijs ging hierdoor in het begin achteruit door de kleine hoeveelheid ervaring die leraren hadden met het toepassen van de bestaande lesvorm binnen een online leeromgeving. Zuyd zag in dat de didactische vaardigheden verschilden tussen docenten en dat werd door de online leervorm vergroot. Door de pandemie werd het moeilijker voor docenten om elkaar onderling op te zoeken en informatie uit te wisselen. Binnen het domein Zorg en Welzijn werd het idee geopperd om een “Professional Learning Community” (PLC) op te richten als oplossing. Een PLC kan gezien worden als een informele groep mensen die kennis en ervaringen met elkaar delen over een gemeenschappelijk onderwerp waarin ze allen geïnteresseerd zijn. De visie van Zuyd “een passie voor ontwikkeling” is een goede basis voor deze community.

Genomen stappen

Om te onderzoeken hoe een PLC er binnen Zuyd uit kan zien hebben we een aantal stappen genomen. Ten eerste hebben we academische literatuur en best practices verzameld over professional learning communities. Op basis van deze resultaten hebben we richtlijnen gemaakt voor interviews die we hebben afgenomen met acht docenten van het domein Zorg en Welzijn. Door dit rapport heen gebruiken we een SWOT analyse waarbij we de “opportunities” en “threats” hebben omgevormd tot hoe een “ideale” professional learning community er uit ziet op basis van de academische literatuur. De “strengths” en “weaknesses” hebben we geformuleerd aan de hand van de antwoorden die we kregen van de leraren bij de interviews.

Bevindingen

De hiervoor genoemde bronnen hebben we gebruikt om bevorderende factoren te formuleren voor een learning community. Dit hebben we vervolgens vertaald naar

aanbevelingen voor Zuyd waarbij we specifiek kijken naar de positionering, implementatie en organisatie van een PLC. Een van de voornaamste bevindingen is om didactische en pedagogische vaardigheden een speerpunt te maken binnen de strategie van Zuyd om zo de implementatie van de PLC te vergemakkelijken. Daarnaast adviseren wij dat de werkgroep blended learning het voortouw moet nemen in het organiseren en faciliteren van de PLC. We adviseren verder dat zij een diverse groep werknemers verzamelen die de kerngroep van de PLC kunnen vormen. Bovendien bevelen we aan dat de opleidingsmanagers de leraren die mogelijk geïnteresseerd zijn persoonlijk moeten benaderen. De urgentie die achter het onderwerp van blended learning zit moet door de directeuren, de werkgroep blended learning en de PLC zelf benoemd worden. Zo groeit de interesse voor didactische en pedagogische vaardigheden, en blended learning. In dit rapport gaan we verder in detail over het organiseren en toepassen van onze bevindingen.

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Introduction

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Introduction

Context: Teaching in a global pandemic

When COVID-19 hit, teachers worldwide were forced to **replace face-to-face education** at the faculty with **online education**, Zuyd University of Applied Sciences (Zuyd) was no exception. This switch had to be done so quickly that teachers hardly had time to prepare. Traditional in-class teaching was substituted by online teaching via platforms such as Microsoft Teams. It was impossible to pay attention to the **educational design** because of the immediate urgency from the rapid, unexpected change that shook the world. The new online educational model did, however, also result in many teachers having great ideas and finding **innovative ways** to deal with online education. Teachers that experience more difficulty with adapting to online education could benefit greatly from the ideas of innovative teachers. The group of teachers that is open to learning new things is growing, which is a perfect situation to make sustainable changes for the upcoming years.

Problem: Learning opportunities for learning from each other and overcoming competency differences are scarce

The sudden shift affected the quality of the teaching methods, as teachers did not have enough time to prepare. **Differences in didactic and pedagogical competencies** already existed before the crisis, but now became more evident in the switch to online education. Teachers already possess a lot of knowledge and can find new ways to coach, instruct, lecture, tutor and prepare students. The **opportunities to learn** with and from each other are, however, limited both within and between academies of Zuyd University of Applied Sciences. Simply substituting face-to-face education with an online environment was not an effective long-term solution. Therefore, the full potential of the organization's human capital can be strengthened. To overcome the differences in didactic and pedagogic skills, this report will thus look for a way in which teachers can learn

more from each other as the right capabilities to overcome this challenge already exist within Zuyd.

Structure of Zuyd University of Applied Sciences

Zuyd University of Applied Sciences (Zuyd) is a professional education institute in the South of The Netherlands with locations in Heerlen, Maastricht, and Sittard. Its focus lies on education for students, research for companies and institutes and study programs for professionals. In total, **1,750 employees** make sure that 14,600 students receive top-notch education. Zuyd is divided into 10 domains, one being "Health and Welfare", by which this project was requested. This Domain consists of **8 academies, and 14 programs in total**. The overview can be found in Appendix A.

**ZU
YD**

Introduction

Assignment: Recommendations for establishing a Professional Learning Community (PLC)

Many teachers see great opportunities for redesigning education towards a **blended learning model** and call for a radical shift. Recently, the Domain of Health and Welfare chose to devote more time to designing an optimal blend of offline and online teaching activities in the near future. A **task force** for blended learning was set up, and all academies have been given DLO-coaches (Digital Learning Environment coaches). Blended learning offers great opportunities to enhance the student experience, but only if it is integrated properly [1]. Since online education widened the already existing disparities in the quality of teaching, a **sustainable solution** has to be found to share innovative ideas and educational models to ensure that the teaching quality remains high, also in a blended learning model. Consequently, **opportunities for teachers** to share experiences, learn from experts and develop

the educational skills needed to establish effective, efficient and attractive educational practices are needed. The Domain of Health and Welfare of Zuyd has therefore requested us to provide recommendations on how to set up and implement **a professional learning community** (PLC) that focuses on the didactic and pedagogical qualities of teachers in a blended learning model.

“What is a professional learning community?”

A community in which people together can share their knowledge and learn from each other by discussing, talking about and creating (new) knowledge.

Zuyd's Profile

Zuyd University of Applied Sciences' vision “**Passion for development**” drives them and ensures that students among all study programs work in small-scale learning environments to equip them with the best preparation for their professional career. To achieve this, Zuyd furthermore connects students to companies, institutions or government bodies during their study program.

This **growth mindset** at Zuyd is central, and does not solely apply to students. In their vision for education they explain how their model of education supports the development of students. Specifically, they put a focus on active and modern **implementation of technology**, the **implementation of research, practical education** with and for the working field, **inclusivity** and a **high level of flexibility to adapt to the changing needs of students**. Additionally, this perspective is reflected in the broad offering of professionalization opportunities by Zuyd. They aim to offer the right support to their teaching staff to ensure that they can continuously **develop themselves** and thereby **grow**.

Introduction

Approach

Part of a good integration of blended learning is that teachers have a good quality of teaching. They have to be experts on their subject, but should also develop into learning experts. By building a **professional learning community (PLC)**, teachers are able to learn from and with each other, focusing on their **teaching competencies**. We therefore designed a customized approach for the Domain of Health and Welfare at Zuyd, by analyzing the current situation in Zuyd and trying to understand how an effective learning community can be formed for teachers to share their knowledge in and work towards a blended education model that ensures a **high quality of teaching** throughout the Domain. In concrete terms, this approach consists of four main steps.

1

Literature review

- What does a PLC look like?
- How to make it thrive?

2

Best practices

- What has been done already?
- What works?

3

Interviews

- What do teachers want?
- What do teachers need?

4

Recommendations

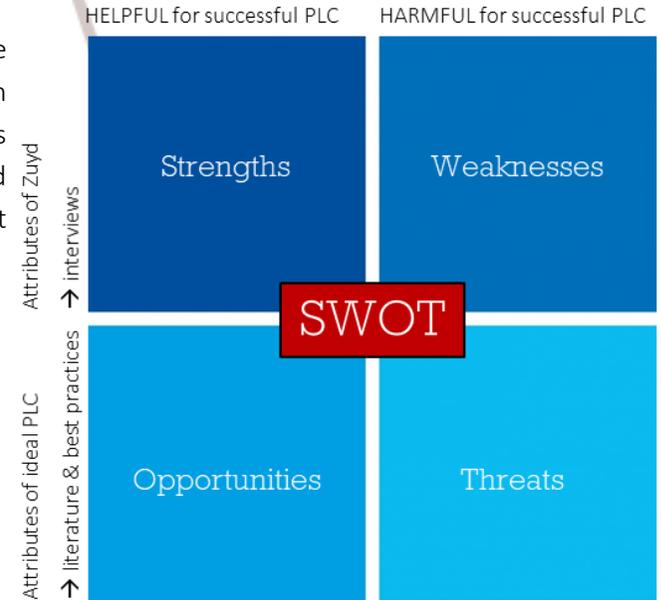
- Strategic positioning
- Implementation
- Organization

Introduction

Approach

Throughout the report, we are using a **SWOT-analysis** as a red thread to compare the findings from literature, best practices and the interviews. We first start by translating the findings of the literature on PLCs and best practices by other firms into Opportunities (characteristics that make it successful) and Threats (downfalls or things that can prevent PLCs from existing/succeeding). Thereby creating a picture of what an “ideal” PLC would look like. Subsequently, we **analyze the interviews** and translate these into Strengths (already existing enablers of PLCs within Zuyd) and Weaknesses (inhibitors of PLCs in Zuyd). We then compare the current situation of Zuyd to the ideal one, thereby making use of the strengths that Zuyd already has and formulating **custom recommendations** based on the three bodies of information. We optimally make use of all Strengths and Opportunities in the recommendations part.

All recommendations can also be found in the infographic. The infographic can be found in appendix B and is an add-on that summarizes the main findings of this report. It is supposed to visually share the information of this report with a broad range of employees of Zuyd.



“What is a SWOT-analysis?”

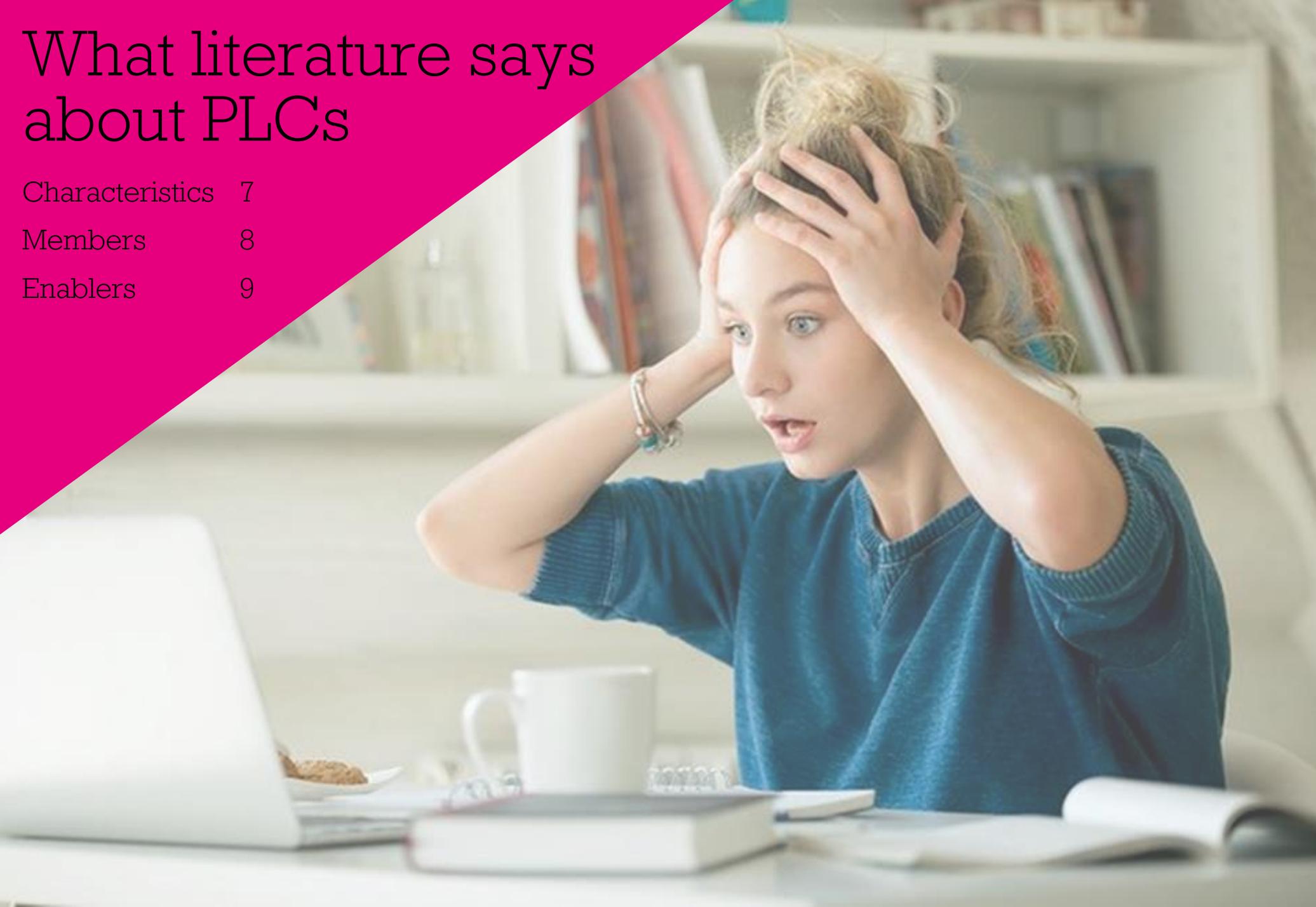
In this Business Consulting Report we make use of a **SWOT-analysis** to compare the literature and best practices with the findings from the interviews and translate this to actionable recommendations for Zuyd University of Applied Sciences. A SWOT analysis is a useful **decision-making tool** because it gives a good overview of complex situations. It is typically used to consider the internal Strengths and Weaknesses of an organization, and compare it to the external Opportunities and Threats that the organization is presented with [2].

What literature says about PLCs

Characteristics 7

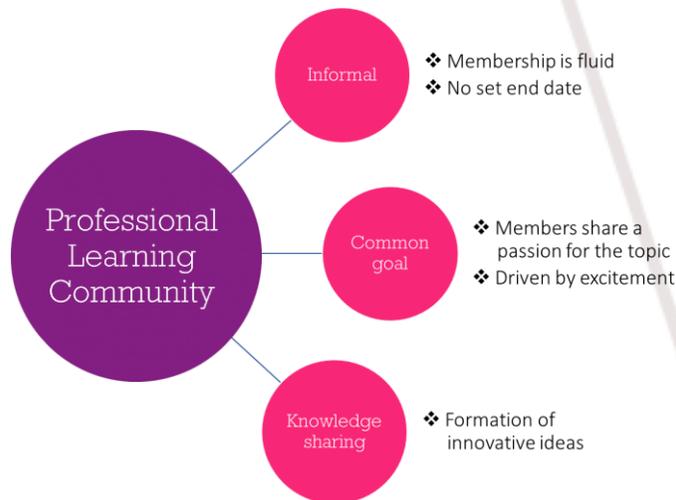
Members 8

Enablers 9



Characteristics of a PLC

A professional learning community (PLC) consists of a team of educators who regularly meet to exchange ideas [6]. PLCs have been shown to be an effective way to gather **new and innovative ideas**. Their efficacy has specifically been shown in teaching teams in coming up with new and effective teaching methods. There, participants connect based on their experiences, expertise or their excitement towards certain topics in creative ways.



PLCs are typically **informal** and consist of a group of individuals who participate **voluntarily** [7]. Members can participate on a come-and-go basis, meaning that they can participate when they have time for it [4]. Participants are united under a **set goal** that they wish to achieve, one that is fluid and without an end result. Additionally, members should personally feel connected to the task, as this strengthens commitment [7]. As a result of this, they differ with regards to formal teams as they have **no set end date** [8].

Additionally, communities of practice have been shown to increase the engagement of their members as it **improves their happiness at work** [6]. Furthermore, it presents a place where teachers can interact with like-minded individuals, and through this enhancing expertise on the topic of interest. All of this can support their day-to-day job [6].

Definition of a PLC

A professional learning community(1) consists of a group of people who come together informally and share knowledge and experiences around a common topic of interest [3]. This can be done in person or virtually. Through this, new knowledge and innovative ideas can be generated, and the development of the organization can be supported [4]. Furthermore, tacit knowledge, so knowledge that is hard to communicate, can be kept in the organization more easily [5].

(1): Literature often refers to communities of practice [7]. For the ease of this report, we equate both terms and only refer to professional learning communities.

Members of a PLC

Due to their informal structure, professional learning communities are very dependent on their participants. Typically, it is possible to divide members in a PLC in different groups, based on their level of involvement [9].

The core group

In order for a PLC to succeed, it needs to have a **core group**. The core group consists of the **most active members**, those members that organize, engage, participate and share ideas in the activities and organization of the PLC. These individuals are considered to be “at the heart of the community”. It is crucial that these people are passionate about the topic and can therefore energize the whole group [7].

The active group

The second layer is considered to be **the active group**; these members attend meetings regularly and **participate occasionally** in the community, but without the regularity or intensity of the core group [9].

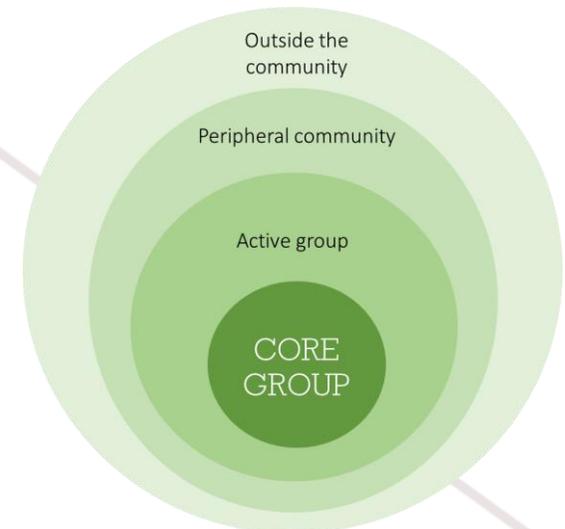
The peripheral community

The third layer is considered to be the **peripheral community** members, those who **rarely participate yet, still take away new knowledge and insights**. Occasionally this newly gained knowledge gets shared with people outside the PLC, which makes the peripheral members extremely valuable.

Outside of the community

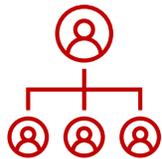
Finally, those individuals that are outside of the learning community, should not be missed either. Even though they are **not actual members, they might still benefit** from the community as a result of the achievements and topics discussed. When they get informed regularly, those individuals can help share knowledge to further parts of the organization. Information can for example get shared through online platforms, newsletters or e-mails [9].

As members of the core group interact a lot, it is very likely that they develop common **knowledge, ideas and understandings** of certain topics. Even though this development makes it easier to communicate, it can also lead to tunnel vision, which can hinder the development of new ideas and innovations. Due to this, **peripheral members are crucial for the development of new ideas**, as those individuals add new value to discussions through new perspectives and insights [10].



Enablers of a PLC

Even though PLCs come with great potential, their usage in the professional field is rather limited. This might be due to the complexity that comes with PLCs and the high risk of failure when not approached with the right mindset or resources [7]. We explain the characteristics that are needed within the broader organization, leadership capabilities within the PLC and barriers to intrinsic motivation for employees to participate.



Organizational Support

Support from the organization has been shown to be incredibly important, as PLCs have been shown to require significant resources. These resources can take the form of **monetary and time resources, motivating the workforce** to participate in the learning community. When this support does not exist,

employees of an organization might not be motivated to participate in the PLC, as the company culture does not seem to consider it a valuable undertaking [11].

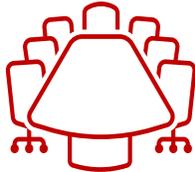
By providing a clear strategic objective, the PLC can help its members follow a concrete direction. It is e.g., advisable to refer to measurable objectives, like cost reduction or increase in customer satisfaction. This way members can actively perceive the benefits of their efforts in the PLC. [12]. This strategic objective can then be divided into **sub-topics** in the PLC by its members based on topics they find important. This can help members to concentrate their efforts on the desired topics and share best practices on these.

Management can further aid by regularly allowing **outside external parties** to be invited to the PLC, to ensure a fresh stream of knowledge which the members of the PLC can use to further create innovative ideas and develop their capabilities [12].

Organizations can further ensure success by **identifying groups that already exist** within the organization that share knowledge among each other and giving them a platform in which they can continue to do so with other like-minded individuals [7].

By actively **integrating the PLC into the business strategy** and ensuring that it is aligned with the broader organizational goals, learning communities can work together with the organization to improve its effectiveness, productivity and innovation. This is done through the improvement of the capabilities of the human capital while simultaneously coming up with new and innovative ideas [6].

Enablers of a PLC



Facilitation and Leadership

The role of a facilitator

As members tend to have regular contact with only a limited number of other members of the PLC, there is only limited knowledge concerning the functioning of the whole group, which could lead to communication issues, and hence coordination problems. Therefore, it is crucial that a facilitator guides the group. Successful facilitators are able to build trust and alliances and as a result motivate participation among the members. The overall goal of a facilitator is to manage and **guide the entity towards strategic relevance** for the organization to ensure that it continuously adds value [13]. To achieve this, a major task of the facilitator would be e.g., to schedule meetings, invite participants and

ensure that information is communicated to other parts of the organization.

The role of shared leadership

As noted previously, knowledge sharing and the generation of innovative ideas are goals for successful PLCs. It has been shown that direct leadership is a less effective method for these processes to take place within innovative teacher teams. This is where **shared leadership** comes in.

Within the PLC, the leadership tasks aimed at coming up with innovative ideas should be performed by the members of the PLC rather than the facilitator or governing bodies. This ensures that the learning community functions as effectively and efficiently as possible. Direct leadership within the PLCs activities can have negative effects on its outcomes.

We thus identify two distinct leadership capabilities needed for the success of a PLC, a **facilitator** who guides the learning community and **shared leadership within the PLC** itself to ensure the formation of new and innovative ideas.

“What is shared leadership?”

Shared leadership can be understood as a dynamic and interactive group process in which members of the community guide themselves towards goals. This entails that each community member has the autonomy to take over each role. Roles can change fluidly based on time resources and competencies [14].

Enablers of a PLC

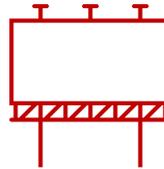


Engagement

To ensure that individuals participate within a PLC, specifically in the sharing of information and the activities organized, participant engagement is a necessity [11]. There are a multitude of actions that can be taken to inspire engagement within the PLC itself. As mentioned before, a **clear and inspiring mission and vision** is necessary to ensure that teachers are willing to collaborate within the PLC. This should be communicated by the facilitator of the group and as mentioned before, align with the strategic objective of the company [15]. Additionally, we see organizational support as a supportive tool for member engagement [11].

Furthermore, it was shown that members with a relatively high job engagement also have

significantly higher engagement in the professional learning community. The engagement gets enhanced when the individual sees an **added value through the community**. It is therefore important that members at all times support the vision and the mission of the community and see the value in their actions [16].



Format of a PLC: onsite vs. online

It is however important to take into consideration that the requirements of professional learning communities differ depending on whether or not they are held **online or face-to-face**. As the pandemic forces us to work remotely most of the time nowadays, it is crucial to also observe the impact this has on PLCs. Two distinct forms of PLCs are often discussed within the literature,

each with their own benefits. In the following, the features of onsite and virtual PLCs will be elaborated on.

Onsite PLCs

On the one hand, **onsite** PLCs where participants meet face-to-face actively have been shown to **improve engagement, satisfaction and relationships** [6]. In face-to-face meetings, participants of a PLC can actively receive feedback, construct new ideas together and have been shown to affect the organization through motivating a higher learning orientation [6] [7]. As participants actively meet with each other, it **can reduce their feeling of isolation, foster a shared responsibility** for success and reduce absence in their day-to-day work. Thus, it can improve the human capital of the organization and the quality of education [17]. These are factors that are hard to recreate when PLCs are held online, as educators are not actively engaging with each other.

Enablers of a PLC

Online PLCs

On the other hand, **online** professional learning communities have been receiving more attention as **technology has allowed us to cross boundaries**. The benefits are clear as online PLCs provide more time and space for teachers to learn and collaborate on their own terms, lower costs of time demands as opposed to on-site professional development activities and more freedom for teachers to connect closely with members who share the same interests without disturbing group dynamics [6] [17]. Additionally, not all members of a PLC are equally active, but all members can benefit from the knowledge that gets shared within the community. In a **virtual** professional learning community, knowledge sharing can be made **more easily accessible for every member** through the effective use of members postings or comments in online platforms. This can be especially helpful for new members, as they can easily build a knowledge base to get on the same page as other members. Whilst this presents a big

advantage, a big challenge lies in sharing tacit knowledge remotely as the social aspect of interactions, and thus personally getting to know each other, is at risk of getting lost [16]. Due to these benefits, online PLCs have been shown **to increase the amount of exchange** that teachers engage in about their learning as opposed to onsite PLCs. Additionally, participants of online learning communities indicate that the retention and sharing of knowledge is easier when online platforms are used [17].

Blended approach

More recently, **blended PLCs** are becoming more common as they aim to reduce the downsides of both types of PLCs by using the benefits of each simultaneously. Online PLCs can extend more traditional onsite learning communities as face-to-face discussions and follow-up questions can continue online, after or between events [17]. Additionally, blended PLCs can also increase the amount of knowledge shared as individuals who, for whatever reason might not feel as comfortable

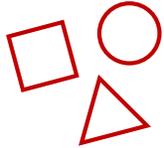
sharing their ideas, can do so online where there is less of a barrier [6].

As soon as the current situation allows it, it is therefore recommended to make use of both practices. This would then translate into effective use of remote networks on the one hand, but also social face-to-face interactions on the other.

The table below illustrates the main characteristics of onsite and virtual PLCs. It should be noted that features are not mutually exclusive. The table represents benefits of one form of a PLC as opposed to the other.

| Onsite PLCs | Virtual PLCs |
|------------------------------|---|
| Face-to-face meetings | Through online platforms |
| Reduce feelings of isolation | More flexibility |
| Construction of new ideas | Members can all be kept on the same information level |
| Foster shared responsibility | Barrier to share knowledge is smaller |
| Feedback culture | Tacit knowledge might get lost |

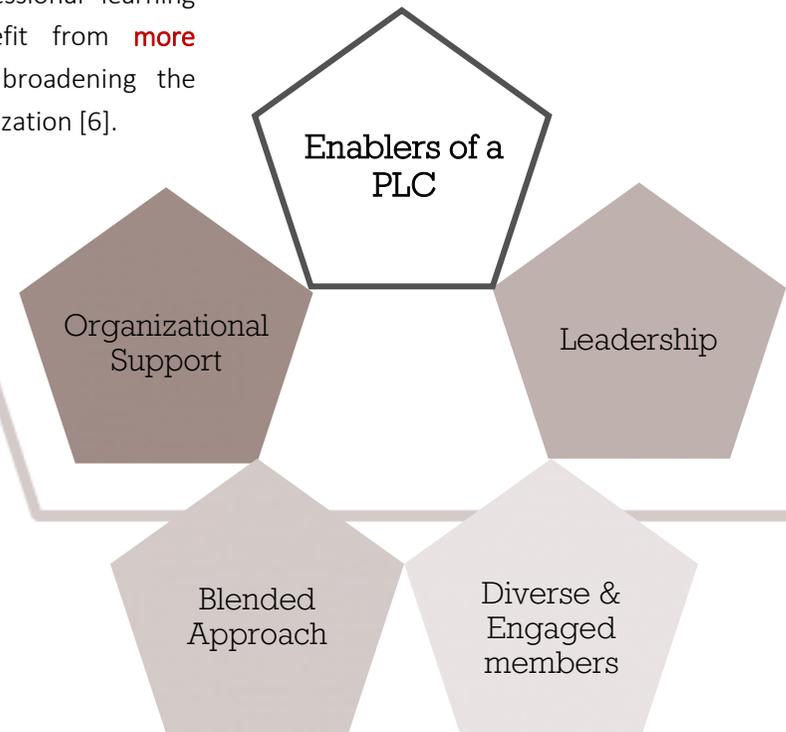
Enablers of a PLC



Diversity

Regardless of how PLCs are organized, collaboration is more effective when membership is **diverse in terms of roles, areas and levels of expertise** [6]. **Diversity of opinions and backgrounds** can lead to **different perspectives and new knowledge** in the group, thereby challenging participants to more innovative ideas [5]. Diversity in membership is more important than size as it is considered to be an important stimulant for sharing knowledge, expertise, experience and perspectives among PLC members, this in turn increases its effectiveness [6]. Additionally, members of a learning community can affect the broader organization by implementing the practices and information gained from the PLC, as noted previously. When a more diverse

workforce in terms of roles, backgrounds and expertise share this knowledge throughout the organization, the effect of the innovative practices in the PLC can have a broader effect on the organizations culture and practices. Through diversity, the professional learning community can thus benefit from **more divergent viewpoints** while broadening the effect that it has on the organization [6].



SWOT overview table based on literature

| Opportunities | Threats |
|---|--|
| Engaged employees | Disengaged employees |
| Regularly inform “outsiders”, to ensure future membership | Few new members due to lack of knowledge sharing |
| Support from the organization | Lack of resources |
| Formation of a clear, strategic goal, vision and mission | No clear objective |
| Identify and contact already existing (informal) groups | Existing groups are content with the current set up; unwillingness to join |
| Community manager and shared leadership | Direct leadership style |
| Hybrid form (online & on-site) | Focus on online OR on-site |
| Diversity in participants | Incorrect management of different viewpoints |

How other organizations make use of PLCs

IBM 16

Hill's Pet Nutrition 17

Hewlett-Packard 18



Best Practices

In the following part of the report, we elaborate on **three best practice examples** from companies who work with professional learning communities, which are IBM, Hill's Pet Nutrition and Hewlett-Packard. Common findings are presented afterwards and the takeaways are translated into opportunities and threats for the SWOT analysis.



IBM

In the early 1990s the once highly admired company IBM was facing serious challenges that mainly arose from leadership problems. Whilst IBM was running behind on every technological trend that was coming up, companies like Intel and Microsoft were slowly taking over the market. As IBM's market value fell tremendously, it looked like the company would crash in the near future. However, they managed to survive and even became the

leading service provider [18]. **How did they do that?**

The success story started with David Grossmann, a mid-level employee who was convinced of the importance the internet would have one day. As he didn't feel heard by management, he **started looking for allies** in the company – and found them.

This initially small group of employees **all shared visions** of what the internet could do in the future. When they started sending out informal mails to all IBM employees, informing them on how IBM could make optimal use of these opportunities, they found an interested audience. Resultantly, they found a big audience of hackers in IBM that all shared the same passion, even though they **come from diverse departments** all over IBM. They shared newly gained technological knowledge through an online news group with each other. It was thus possible for them to **continuously enhance their expertise** on the field they were most interested in. One of

Grossmann's closest and most important allies was John Patrick, who also was part of IBM's strategy task force. Through him, Grossmann was able to communicate with management and explain their ambitions and needs of the community. Patrick acted like a **translator**, as he knew how to speak the same language as the management board. Without this, it would have been hard for the community to receive blessings from management, as personal connections would not have been present. Even though Grossmann and his allies achieved a lot without support from higher up, as soon as essential changes need to be made, blessings from senior management are needed.

But why did this community work so much better than a regular project group, whose ideas come from the top? What did they pay attention to?

They...

Best Practices

They:

1. Articulated their point of view **sharply**
2. Wrote down **thoughts and ideas** to infect others with their **passion**
3. Found a group of colleagues who shared the **same drive**
4. Got the blessings of the **senior management** – without their **support**, it might have been hard to reach the goal
5. **Convinced people** – showed management how they could profit → win-win situation
6. Found a **translator** – someone who could build a **bridge to management**
7. Showed that ideas are actually **working and efforts** are worth it

Unconsciously, Grossman set up a **learning community and infiltrated the whole organization** of IBM, rather than only managing an isolated project people could look away from [18].

This case demonstrates that **core values should be represented in everyone** as it drives purpose and motivation in all employees and hence leading to successes that would otherwise not be possible. Moreover, when **change comes from within the organization**, the chances of its success are higher.

The formation of learning communities does not always happen as naturally as in IBM, but companies can still use them as an effective tool to improve their way of working. This is shown nicely by the cases of Hewlett-Packard and Hill's Pet Nutrition facility.



Hill's Pet Nutrition

Due to their professional learning community, Hill's Pet Nutrition was able to significantly reduce downtime and enhance their performance in various fields. Hence, demonstrating clearly that it pays off to invest in **connecting employees from different fields**.

Without the connection of diverse knowledge among the company, these achievements would have never been possible.

At Hill's Pet Nutrition in Indiana, the learning community was formed after managers and technicians attended a retreat where they were informed about PLCs and their positive effects.

What did they do afterwards?

Best Practices

What they did afterwards:

1. Formation of a community group with **weekly meetings**
2. Election of one **facilitator** by the community – his/her task is to keep the group on track and to ensure that people with relevant expertise are present in the meetings when needed
3. Granting everyone a certain number of **hours each week to participate**
4. Leaving room for **personal discussions**, which fosters a more familiar atmosphere

These steps ensured that the community was highly motivated to work on their goal, which at that time was to convince management to install the latest technology. Members were so motivated to bring in their personal expertise that they even came to the community meetings next to their regular working hours [7].



Hewlett-Packard

At Hewlett-Packard, a facilitator from a knowledge management support team brought a group of product delivery consultants together who were facing similar problems. However, these people were scattered all over North America, which led them to use **monthly teleconferences** to connect. Even though participation was voluntary, numbers were steadily high.

As members of the professional learning community **shared similar problems**, they could learn a lot from each other's experiences, making participation extremely valuable..

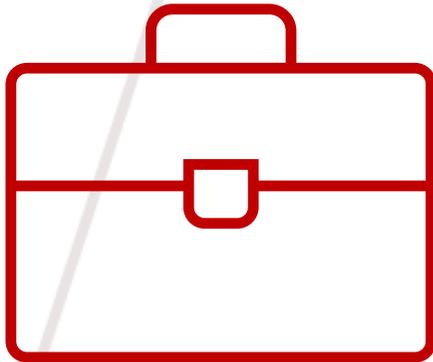
Another important aspect that facilitated the success of Hewlett-Packard's PLCs, is that meetings would be held completely **informal**. When members present a problem to the group, no formal presentation is needed, but rather a discussion evolves, in which everyone shares their thoughts.

All of this made work for the community a lot easier and more effective. But most importantly, the former isolated consultants go to work now with a feeling of belonging and trust [7].

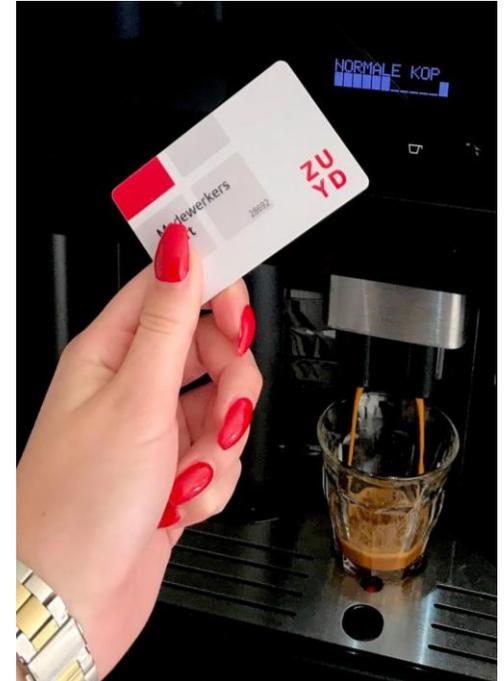
Best Practices

Main takeaways

When we look at the presented best practices, some steps to take are overlapping and can therefore be treated as main takeaways from the best practices:



1. When the PLC does not emerge naturally, the formation needs to be facilitated (e.g., through an external force, like a consulting agency)
2. Purpose, goal, vision and mission should be communicated clearly to all members
3. A facilitator is needed - someone who guides the group towards their goal
4. Participation is voluntary - members can decide when they want to participate and to what degree
5. Meetings should be scheduled regularly
6. Informal meetings - to ensure natural discussions arise and everyone can speak up



SWOT overview table based on best practices

| Opportunities | Threats |
|---|--|
| Engaged employees <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • shared passion for the topic • voluntary participation • sharing experiences | |
| Regularly inform “outsiders”, to ensure future membership <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • convince them of the importance | Isolated project |
| Support from the organization <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • show them how to profit → win-win • translator to build a bridge to management • facilitate the formation of a PLC if it does not naturally occur | Ignorance of management <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • insufficient amount of hours available • no driving force; no PLC |
| Everyone supports core values | |
| Periodically set meetings Informal atmosphere | |

What interviewees pointed out

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Interview Results

Our approach

We contacted the three organizational coaches to send out a survey in which employees of the Domain of Health and Welfare could indicate a time that they would be available during the period of 10-05-2021 until 20-05-2021 to be interviewed. We received **8 respondents**, three of which were teachers at the academy of midwifery, three were teachers at the academy of speech therapy, one was a teacher at the academy of nursing and another was a teacher at the academy of physiotherapy. The interviews were conducted in **a semi-structured manner** where the topics discussed were divided by our findings in the literature review, such as **characteristics, enablers and inhibitors**, but also the **relationship between a PLC and increased teaching quality**, and finally **strengths and weaknesses for the SWOT analysis**. The specific questions can be found in the interview guideline in Appendix C. The interviews were then transcribed and coded in the coding table (Appendix D). The answers

given to our interviews were analyzed in four separate blocks, each related to one of the aforementioned topics. Then, we draw conclusions based on the given answers. The responses to our interviews were completely anonymized to ensure that one's opinions and answers cannot be linked back to the person.

Characteristics



Common goal

According to the interviews, the main functions of the PLC should be about **increasing knowledge transfer, learning from each other and creating new knowledge**. Specifically, it was indicated that some academies do things well and that this knowledge is shared only in that academy, even though other teachers could learn a lot from this as well, but that these opportunities hardly exist. The focus of the teachers within the PLC should be mainly aimed at content,

goals of the PLC, and the approach that should be taken.

The general consensus within the responses is that the PLC should consist of a **larger body with different subdivisions** as “nothing evolves as fast as education, one topic is hot today and not the next day”. There should thus be flexibility within the PLC for teachers, when a topic is deemed important or essential, to form a subgroup within the PLC where they can discuss these topics and formulate solutions and ideas to these specifically. The overall goal of the PLC should be about the retention, development and implementation of innovative practices.

- *“It needs to be sustainable for the future, so that we are prepared if something similar like we have faced now, happens again.”* -

Interview Results



Knowledge sharing

There needs to be an **online platform** where knowledge can be stored so that it can be retained, interpreted and understood by teachers inside and outside of the PLC. A good platform for inside the PLC is **Teams**, for outside the PLC it can be **ZuydNet**. It allows the teachers to share interesting articles, have one on one meetings anyplace, anytime and ask questions that can be answered later and stored in the online chat function. This might also lower the boundary for some teachers to participate, according to one interviewee, as it can be easily adapted to their schedules. Additionally, there seems to be a need for an online platform where “people could ask their questions, share info and be with each other” so that if teachers have questions or issues they can immediately be helped. One potential bottleneck that was recognized by our interviewees was that teachers might be

too busy to answer questions. It was therefore recommended to have a group of dedicated individuals initially to answer questions.

The benefit of a PLC is also that you have **experts on specific topics** that can then be invited to speak at more formal meetings outside of the PLC.

Members



Core group

It would be best to have **members from all academies**. They all have different knowledge and experience on a variety of topics that others might be less familiar with. There has to be a good mix of people, as the problems that are raised can be very diverse. One interviewee indicated that she would want there to be **two members per academy**, so that they can alternate who is to join the meetings to make scheduling easier. Furthermore, the group should not be too big because that

might result in disengagement.

The people that are part of the core group should be the ones most **intrinsically motivated**.



Active group

No employee or teacher should be excluded from participating. The **membership** for this group should be more **flexible**. One interviewee did note that when people sign up for something like this, they might be more proactive in thinking about issues they come across when working, that might be good to bring to the attention of the core group. Others noted that it would be good if people can sign up for one event, and that that could be a starting point, so that when this is deemed useful, they will also join another time and get more active by that.

Interview Results



Peripheral community

All other teachers from within the Domain that have no special interest in participating in the PLC are part of the peripheral community.



Outside of the community

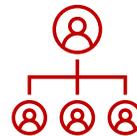
One interviewee noted that **people from other domains** within Zuyd might be interested in what is discussed in the PLC. Additionally, when they see that the PLC is successful in increasing teaching quality, they might also want to integrate it in their Domain, and they can then use the PLC of the Domain of Health and Welfare as an example.



Students

Students were also mentioned as important potential participants. Teachers indicated that they think that it is important that the **end user** (student) is also present to share their perspectives on the proposed solutions, but that they should not be present at all times as this might lead to teachers feeling less safe and thereby not sharing as much as they would.

Enablers



Organizational Support

Issues

The interviews showed us that employees recognize there to be some support, but not enough in a few areas. Specifically,

interviewees noted that they **lacked support** with regards to technological skills, which are in fact essential for online teaching.

Additionally, it was mentioned that a lot of the **decisions made by Zuyd** are done so without asking the opinion of the teaching staff. This sometimes results in decisions being made too quickly and the teachers not being able to fully adapt to them.

There is also insufficient recognition felt by teachers as they felt that their **efforts go unnoticed**. More support seems to be needed to improve the quality of teaching and to allow teachers to spend their time on the professionalization of their didactic and pedagogical skills within the PLC.

- "Showing that they (teachers) are at the heart of education, that it is not always the coordinator but Jan or Peter or Betty who is working with the group every other day. The person who works with the student can find the right answer."-

Interview Results

Solutions

We specifically looked at time and monetary resources that might motivate teachers to participate in the PLC.

It was indicated that teachers would be **willing to spend time on improving their teaching skills**. One issue that was raised was that the 40 hours of professionalization that teachers get mainly goes to the professionalization within their field, not their didactic and pedagogical capabilities. Interviewees noted that focusing more on this, by means of the HR department or educational managers, could motivate teachers to participate within the PLC to improve their capabilities.

With regards to monetary compensation for participating in the PLC, our interviewees rejected this idea stating that “you can’t put everyone in higher scales, that simply doesn’t work”.

A different solution was presented as a result of teachers often not being recognized. One

interviewee noted that Zuyd must show that it is very important to improve your teaching skills and that “people should be appreciated for what they do”. According to her, **highlighting good practices, putting teachers in the spotlight and making sure that the events that are organized are nice** and the teachers there are “pampered” would motivate teachers to join the PLC. Additionally, she indicated that this could also stress the importance that Zuyd puts on didactic and pedagogical skills, thereby improving teacher participation in the PLC.



Facilitation & Shared Leadership

With regards to leadership of the PLC, there seemed to be a similar preference as was reflected within the literature. Specifically, it was shown that **some form of guidance is important to ensure that decisions are made and people receive the right support and are**

made responsible. A need for **self-organization** was also pointed out, reflecting our findings in the literature, indicating that having a clear framework in which the participants themselves can make decisions on content, form and topics would allow for more engagement. This would further allow people to experience things themselves, which would improve their learning and the freedom that they feel. Giving teachers the responsibility themselves, would enable them to share knowledge, create new knowledge and participate actively as they feel ownership.

The initial set-up of the PLC should be done by individuals who are skilled at it, this should not come from the teachers themselves. Zuyd can, according to the responses, facilitate support services such as digital resources and space.

Interview Results



Engagement

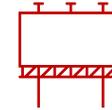
Our interviews indicated that **teachers currently do feel the urgency to improve** their didactic and pedagogical capabilities, specifically with regards to blended learning, but it is not a pillar yet of the organization as a whole.

We further asked our interviewees whether they thought that other teachers would be willing to join. The overarching perspective here was that **“if people decide something is very important to them, they would make time for it.”** A PLC can save a lot of time and could make my job more fun as it would make the tasks easier”. Another interviewee noted that the outcomes of the newly learned didactic and pedagogical skills and capabilities as perceived by students could greatly motivate teachers, in and outside of the PLC, to join. She indicates that “if teachers feel that they

can teach better because of the PLC, if students pick up their learning objectives better, if teachers are able to inspire students better and they are getting reactions from them then the teachers can get more enjoyment out of it”.

She further explained that by having the PLC as a place where you can find “partners in crime” who are facing the same issues this could help teachers to join as they can learn from each other and feel connected. This links in well with organizational support as she explains that “there needs to be a stronger focus on other aspects of being a teacher, a broader definition, where a teacher is not a specialist in his/her topic but also in didactic”. It seems thus that participation is threefold; by means of felt urgency, perceived benefits and organizational support.

- “If you see that because of your behavior the group becomes more active and you can work on the assignments in a nice way, that’s very motivating.” -



Format: blended approach

When thinking of the format that the PLC should take, all interviewees indicated that they preferred a **blended approach**. The first meeting should be in person, so that people can get to know each other. Follow-up meetings should take place online, as this takes less time for teachers and seems to motivate them more to participate as they save travel time. Depending on the function of the meeting, it should be offline or online. Our results indicate that teachers prefer sensitive topics to be discussed face-to-face, whereas a discussion or conversation about, for example, a vision can be held online. When reflecting or creating new knowledge, interviewees preferred to do this offline as well as you are able to see someone’s body language.

Interview Results



Diversity

Finding solutions together and with a diverse group was also deemed useful as they believed that you could come up with novel solutions that you otherwise could not, due to the different perspectives that are taken. This group can be diverse by attracting teachers with **different backgrounds, studies and experience**, which benefits the PLC and its functions.

The relation between a PLC and increased teaching competencies

The interviewees recognized the potential benefits of the PLC, specifically indicating that they believe that **it makes learning more accessible** and can lead to the creation of new knowledge. Especially when students recognize and acknowledge the improved teaching skills, they might get even more

motivated to work on them, by using the resources the PLC has to offer. They then might develop their capabilities even further.

SWOT



Strengths

Zuyd seemingly takes time to really figure out “what works best and then facilitates it well. **Zuyd thinks their decisions through**, and the instruction manuals are useful”.

One interviewee noted that a cultural shift has been taking place over the past few years. She stated that “there is a kind **of transition going on from having to do to wanting to do**, to being developmental. She indicated that the change is still occurring, but that this would allow a PLC to succeed as employees are learning to “put their mess on the carpet rather than under it and see what was not so good, how we can fix it, without shame”.

Two interviewees commented on the opportunities that exist within Zuyd to develop. One noted that “quite **a lot is already organized for teachers when it comes to teaching competencies**. There is a basic course, which we are adjusting, but supply is also increasing in other academies”. According to another interviewee “Zuyd has invested in the guidance and structure of training, a lot of nice programmes”.

It seems that teachers currently **do feel the urgency and the need for improvement**, specifically towards blended learning capabilities.

There is a **strong focus on students**, everything Zuyd does is aimed at improving students’ education and well-being. This can motivate teachers to join a PLC if the goal is to improve the quality of teaching, and thereby improving for the students.

- “We went from a culture of judgment to a culture of development.” -

Interview Results



Weaknesses

Employees within Zuyd do perceive some **support, but say that it is lacking** and that this might inhibit employees from participating in the PLC. Specifically, management and the broader organization should improve its focus on didactic and pedagogical skills and the professionalization of them. One potential issue here is with regards to time constraints as teachers are quite busy and professionalization in didactic and pedagogical skills is not necessarily supported.

One issue raised with regards to the **training programs** is that they are **“focused at the individual teacher”** and that “there is room for improvement here” indicating that a readiness to learn does exist, both within Zuyd and its employee population, but learning from each other is something that can still be improved. According to another interviewee “the training

programs are very specific, you can do it yourself or colleagues do it and they present it to the team”. The focus from Zuyd thus seems to be, to some extent, aimed at the improvement of individual capabilities, yet, “this is mainly facilitation” according to one interviewee.

Most interviewees noted that the **large amount of academies** had negative effects. One interviewee indicated that “due to the large amount of academies there are a lot of conflicting opinions which is hard”. The way that it is currently structured has resulted in “silos” as one interviewee termed it explaining that “all academies are separate from each other and do not work together, they each function separately”. According to another interviewee “when you talk about educational policy or vision, you have to organize it uniformly and cannot do this separately for each academy”. She further noted that “each academy works at a different entry level, each having different courses, ways of working with them and different lesson plans”. She

indicated that the broader organization, Zuyd, does not have a good perspective as to what each entry level is within each domain and that this makes it hard to adapt policies and plans to each situation. She states that “understanding what the starting situation is ensures that you can adjust your plans. All the plans that are there now are not realistic”. According to another interviewee, this also hinders the quality of teaching as she explained that “we have a hard time with how we can involve the professional field in our education whereas physiotherapy is much better with that, it would be nice to discuss how they would do that and learn from them”. She explains that this “would be a really nice addition”, indicating a need for a place where employees, regardless of their Domain, can come together to share best practices and learn from each other. The findings were best summarized by one interviewee who stated that “one department does not know what the other is doing”.

Interview Results



Opportunities

Teachers do, however, **deserve more recognition** and, when the benefits of the PLC become apparent in student reactions, they might be more motivated to join the PLC and become more motivated and happier in their day-to-day work.

Additionally, it was noted that student welfare is incredibly important at Zuyd and that there is a real focus on it. This enables Zuyd with the **opportunity to position the PLC as improving student wellbeing as the quality of teaching goes up**, and thereby motivating individuals to participate within this community.



Threats

It was commented that when people are **obligated to participate**, their willingness to participate can even decrease, resulting in disengaged employees. It becomes a “having to do”, instead of “wanting to do”. This takes away from the potential a PLC has to offer.



SWOT overview table based on interviews

| Strengths | Weaknesses |
|--|--|
| <p>Culture change to focus on development and learning from each other</p> <p>Support from directors for changing mindset/culture</p> | <p>Domains and academies work separately, so they can learn more from each other</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • issues are similar • different levels of pedagogical and didactic skills |
| Felt urgency for blended learning | |
| <p>Careful consideration in decision-making</p> <p>passion for students, are the central focus point</p> | <p>Everything is considered important</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • hard to make choices and keeping focus • do not quit with something if it does not work |
| any resources, useful instruction manuals | People do not find the resources |
| | <p>Large amount of academies, on 3 different locations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • physical and felt distance between domains and academies |
| Recently more appreciation of employees | Appreciation of teachers, but not shown in salary |
| Opportunities | Threats |
| <p>Engaged employees</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • learn more from each other, sharing more and seeking the conversation | <p>Disengaged employees</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • obligation to participate |
| Time and prioritizing things | |

Recommendations

| | |
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Strategic Positioning

Recommendations in three parts

In this section we present a solution to the stated problem, namely, the limited opportunities for learning from each other and thereby overcoming competency differences. Specifically, we present and synthesize our findings from the literature review, best practices and interviews into actionable recommendations for Zuyd to strategically position, implement and organize a PLC. The recommendations section is therefore split up into these three specific topics.

As we have seen from various sources in literature and in best practices, professional learning communities can be of great help when trying to optimize the existing human capital in an organization. As Zuyd already has all the talent it needs inside their organization, a professional learning community can be the perfect way to make optimal use of it. We have seen from literature that it is crucial to align **the focus of any PLC to the company's strategy**. This ensures that the functions that

the PLC engages in are supported by the broader organization. Specifically, positioning the PLC well within the organization's broader strategy will allow for support which is essential in the creation and sustainment of a PLC. Additionally, the participants of a PLC need to be connected by **a common vision and goal**. Based on our sources, we will thus explain in this section how the PLC should be strategically positioned within the organization and to the employees.



Strategic Positioning within the Organization

As noted previously, Zuyd communicates a **passion for development** which drives a growth mindset among the employees. Specifically, training programs are offered and teachers are encouraged to further professionalize within their respective fields. Currently, the gap in

didactic and pedagogical skills as a result of the pandemic has been broadened which poses a challenge to the organization's quality of education. As we have shown, a PLC can close this gap as teachers are motivated to **share, create and discuss** their best practices, experiences and knowledge. The PLC can therefore **target the passion for development** that is central to Zuyd. We believe that this should be the central tenet of communication when garnering support throughout the higher management ranks of the organization. It is specifically important to communicate a sense of urgency around **the existing problem, how the PLC is a solution for this and how it fits into the broader strategy at Zuyd**. Additionally, a focus should be on the benefit for students, as the improvement of didactic and pedagogical capabilities of teachers has a positive effect on **the retention of information, enjoyment and success** that students experience during their studies. This translates into the following strategic objective for the PLC at Zuyd.

Strategic Positioning



Strategic objective for Zuyd

By creating a PLC where teachers can meet informally and discuss topics that are important to them, they have a place to **share, create and discuss** existing and new knowledge. The PLC will allow Zuyd to close the gap in didactic and pedagogical capabilities within teachers whilst increasing the skills that they have, thereby positively impacting the quality of education for students. The PLC will give teachers a place to develop continuously and further motivate them to work on the improvement of their didactic and pedagogical capabilities next to other issues. Currently, as we are facing the challenges of the pandemic, blended learning should be the starting point as we believe that the PLC can solve the existing issue within the organization.

We believe that this vision for the PLC allows it to be integrated within the business strategy and motivates members to participate.

Strategic Positioning for the Employees

Members of a PLC are united under a set goal that they wish to achieve, **one that is fluid and without an end result**. It is important that participants feel personally connected to the task as this improves their participation and engagement. In order to ensure that teachers are engaged with the PLC, there needs to be a thorough understanding of **the goal, the functions and the urgency of the PLC**. Firstly, when thinking of the **set goal** for the PLC, we believe that it should be one that can motivate and engage teachers to continue working within the PLC. We thus formulate the following strategic goal for teachers : **“A place for all teachers to share knowledge, learn from each other and create new knowledge and best practices that can be readily applied to their teaching”**. Additionally, the interviews showed us that currently, as a starting point, teachers feel a heightened **sense of urgency** regarding

blended learning. We believe that this should be the main starting point that should be communicated to ensure that teachers would like to make time within their already packed schedule. It is important to communicate an ability to talk about different topics and that blended learning should **not be the only focus**. Teachers should feel free, when participating within the PLC, to **dictate their own content**. All of this translates into the the strategic goal of the PLC to the teachers on the next page.

We believe that the underlying **common vision**, the **described functions** and the **communication of urgency** will motivate teachers to participate and engage within the PLC.

In the following part of the recommendations, we talk about how to successfully organize the PLC and finally present five steps to implement the learning community.

Organization

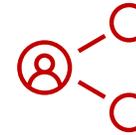
Strategic objective for the teachers

The PLC is a safe place where we can talk about our challenges and improve our didactic and pedagogical capabilities with our colleagues, thereby improving student wellbeing. By creating a place for all teachers to share knowledge, learn from each other and create new knowledge and best practices, we can readily apply them to our teaching and improve student engagement. By learning from each other, we can understand the challenges that we and our colleagues face and tackle it head on, ensuring that we have the right capabilities to overcome any challenge in the future. The main focus at this point will be blended learning, as a result of the pandemic, but our end goal is to improve our didactic and pedagogical capabilities in the broader sense by choosing topics that we believe are important.



Members

In order to keep meetings efficient, the core group should **not contain too many participants**. Suggestions made during the interviews, were for example to have two people per academy join the core group. The responsibility here lies with the facilitator and the task force to ensure that a **diverse set of people** are participating within the core group and subsequent activities organized by the PLC. All interviewees agreed that students should somehow be included in the PLC, a recommendation being that there are **occasionally student representatives** partaking in activities organized by the PLC when members feel that a students' opinion would be valuable. It is important to understand here that the participation of students could reduce the feeling of safety that teachers experience in sharing their struggles, we therefore recommend to include them when new lesson plans or tools are developed to ensure that their perspective can also be implemented.



Knowledge sharing opportunities

Based on the interviews, our recommendation would be that once the core group is established, **a start-up meeting should be organized**. This start-up meeting should be open to any teacher who is interested to participate in the PLC. The first meeting can be used to discuss the proposed starting topic, blended learning, while opening up the possibility for potential participants to raise topics that they deem important and create sub-groups for them within the broader PLC. The focus here should be to explain what the PLC will do, create a safe space by means of sharing hardships that teachers face and allow for individual participants to see and recognize that other teachers also wish to participate within the PLC. Opportunities to share knowledge are currently limited throughout the Domain. For the PLC, sharing knowledge among the core group, and the rest of the Domain will happen on 5 occasions:

Organization

Knowledge sharing opportunities:

1. The **PLC meets every quarter** to share new and innovative ideas. The first meeting of the school year is in person, the others could either be done via a video meeting on Teams or in person depending on the preference of attendants. Further organization of meetings for the broader PLC and its subgroups are possible and can be organized through Zuyd as well.
2. To be able to ask questions, share information and interact with colleagues from the PLC, a **new group in Teams** must be set-up. This is also the place where video conferences can be held. Additionally, information about all subgroups and topics within the PLC are shared here so all participants can read up on what the PLC is doing.
3. The core group shares the main information and innovations that were found by the PLC and present them at the

- annual educational event.** This allows for people who do not participate in the PLC to recognize its added benefit, spreads information throughout the organization and allows for the invitation of new perspectives.
4. Information and innovations are shared by members of the core group in **team meetings of the academy.** Other participants can also invite members of the PLC to give information on topics that they deem important.
5. A **quarterly update on ZuydNet** is a useful way to create an overview of all information and innovations, so that teachers also know where to find this. The communication allows for teachers to continuously see the added benefit of the PLC and can increase their engagement and participation within it.

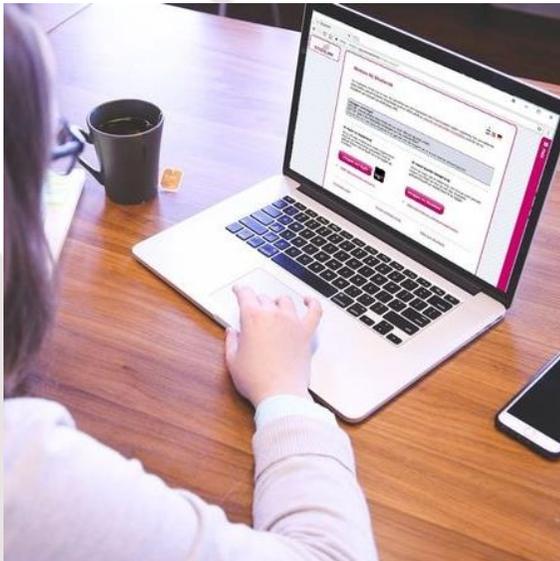


Online platform

As noted, an online platform needs to exist where teachers are able to share knowledge, engage and ask questions with each other **between meetings.** Our interviews showed us that the existence of such a platform would be beneficial for teachers as they could get **responses to their questions just in time.** However, our interviews showed us that teachers, at the beginning, might only be willing to ask questions rather than answer them. We believe that it is necessary, at the start, to have a **dedicated group of individuals** whose task it will be to answer questions that are posted on the online platform. This will ensure that the online platform will be more active and, that when teachers see that others are answering, they might be motivated to answer as well at a later stage.

Organization

The activity of the dedicated group will be high at the start but we believe that after some time, when the effectiveness of the platform has been shown, teachers will be more willing to answer questions and the dedicated groups responsibility will subside. By allowing teachers to engage with each other, and having the ability to have their questions answered, teachers will feel more supported by the organization, and the PLC, thereby increasing their willingness to participate and the feeling of safety within the PLC.



Topics discussed in the PLC

Due to the urgency blended learning comes with at the moment, we advise the facilitators of the PLC to present this topic in the first meeting and to get participants to share experiences and best practices around that topic. Several sub-topics of blended learning can be discussed, such as student-teacher interaction, tools and systems used, long-term keepers of online education and the optimal use of online education. Additionally, the possibility in the first meeting exists to create new sub-groups that entail different topics

outside of blended learning. However, as a starting point, we believe that blended learning is the right topic to discuss. As time progresses, the facilitator can still give exemplary topics, but the ultimate decision should come from the whole group, as literature outlines the importance of highly motivated and interested employees and their ability to guide their own actions. In the end, decisions regarding content, organization and discussions within the PLC should be made by the participants to ensure that a **shared leadership style** is present, thereby improving the functions of the PLC. The facilitator should however, make sure that the topics discussed are within the scope of the learning community, namely didactic and pedagogical skills.

Implementation: 5 steps to success

Step 1: Find a Facilitator and Collect Allies

The literature showed us that a good starting point for the implementation of a PLC is the recognition of **groups that already exist within the organization** that aim to come up with innovative practices and share information. This view was represented within the best practices as the step after the strategic positioning was about finding like minded colleagues. Our interviews show that this view was represented among the teachers, as they indicated that a good starting point is the **formulation of a core group** that can guide the group's activities. Therefore, we recommend that the first step to be taken by Zuyd is to find a group of like-minded, motivated individuals that are energized by the strategic objective of the PLC. Specifically, we recommend that a **facilitator** is assigned who can start the project and looks throughout the Domain of Health and Welfare to find a group of **people who wish to engage and start the PLC**. The responsibility here lies with the recently

started "**task force blended learning**", we believe that they are in the right position to first assign a facilitator of the PLC. We believe that this should be someone who is present in the task force as they are in close contact with the Director of the Domain of Health and Welfare. This facilitator, together with the task force, can start with the identification of existing groups and subsequently like-minded individuals who are of a diverse background. As reflected in the literature and the interviews, the core group should be a group of **diverse individuals**, incorporating people from **each academy**, different backgrounds and fields of expertise. We believe that finding the right people from the blended learning team, teams aimed at improving quality of education, innovating learning practices and 'teacher leaders' could lead to a **motivated and engaged core group** that can kickstart the PLCs initial activities. Additionally, having a diverse set of individuals with varying backgrounds would allow for a larger effect throughout the Domain and a **broader reach** to inform

employees who are "outside" of the PLC of its beginning and potentially having a larger group of people you could invite to join.

Step 2: Finding the Right Support

One of the main **challenges** found within the literature, the best practices and the interviews, was **support from the organization**. Specifically, support from the organization was seen as a **necessity** to ensure that teachers will feel the **freedom and motivation** to participate. Applying this to Zuyd, we noticed that the focus on the improvement of **didactic and pedagogical skills** differed greatly per academy and that time constraints were considered to be a major issue to overcome. We believe that the facilitator, and the core group, should get in contact with the **educational managers**, and the **HR department**, and explain the added benefit of starting a PLC. By convincing these key stakeholders of the importance of the PLC, and its potential benefits, these stakeholders will be able to create a **basis of support**.

Implementation: 5 steps to success

Thereby, teachers will be convinced of the importance of these capabilities and potentially feel a lower threshold to join the PLC. Specifically, one key bottleneck that was recognized were the **40 hours of professionalization** that each teacher gets. Currently, this is mainly used for professionalization in one's respective field of study. Teachers indicated that a sense of **urgency and relevance** is needed in order for them to join a PLC aimed at improving didactic and pedagogical capabilities. By indicating the **possibility and importance to work on didactic and pedagogical capabilities**, indicating a sense of urgency and explaining its benefits in the improvement of educational quality for students, teachers might be more willing to spend part of those 40 professionalization hours on the PLC, thereby improving their didactic and pedagogical capabilities. As one interviewee noted, teaching is about more than just knowledge, it is also about your ability to teach, and this is something that needs to be reflected within the behaviour and actions of the management and HR

department of Zuyd. The facilitator assigned by the task-force and the individuals recognized as the core group should get in contact with the educational managers to share this vision. Specifically, we believe that the **infographic** can serve as a useful tool to explain the existing problem, how a PLC can serve as a solution and the importance of didactic and pedagogical skills. Educational managers were recognized as people who would be good mentors that could communicate the importance of didactic and pedagogical skills to the individual teachers as they are approached regarding how the 40 hours of professionalization should be spent. We believe that by convincing the HR department and the educational managers of the importance of the PLC that the urgency is recognized and support for teachers to participate in the PLC will increase.

Step 3: Giving the Right Support

Additionally, Zuyd needs to facilitate **supportive services** such as an online platform,

help with scheduling and resources to ensure that teachers are able to participate and join, thereby feeling supported when engaging with the PLC. The resources that are specifically needed to organize a successful **blended PLC** should come from Zuyd. Specifically, the literature showed us that online can greatly benefit offline meetings by means of having a **platform** in which teachers can **share knowledge, ask questions and engage with each other** outside, between and throughout meetings. By facilitating an online platform that can cater to these needs, **knowledge sharing, communication and engagement** between participants can be greatly improved, thereby increasing the effectiveness of the PLC and the reach that it can have to other colleagues. This need was reflected by our interviewees who indicated that they would like to have an online platform where **any teacher can ask a question**, and any teacher can answer a question. We believe that this should, in the beginning, be done by a **dedicated group of individuals** so that questions can be answered timely.

Implementation: 5 steps to success

Therefore, the threshold for other teachers to answer and ask questions will be lowered and the tasks that the dedicated group undertakes can **slowly be taken over by the teachers** as the feeling of a **community** increases. For offline meetings, Zuyd should support the PLC by means of **providing a location to meet and a budget to organize the meetings**. This will ensure that members can see that the PLC is **taken seriously** and that individuals participating are supported. This lends credibility to the organization and motivates teachers to join. The responsibility here lies with the aforementioned educational managers and HR department. We believe that they should be mobilized to gather the right resources so that the PLC can thrive and fulfill its functions as effectively as possible.

Step 4: Communicating the Change

Communication is going to be essential to ensure that teachers outside of the core group and the facilitator are **aware of what is happening**. After the first steps have been

taken, the core group has been formed, the stakeholders have been convinced and the platform is available, the **renewed focus on didactic and pedagogical capabilities should be communicated**. Specifically, the **creation of the PLC, the strategic goals and objectives and the preferred outcomes** should be made known throughout the organization to ensure that teachers are aware of when the first meeting will take place, what the PLC is and what the aims of it are. Specifically, the task-force, the HR department and the educational managers need to communicate a joint statement in which they explain the renewed vision on the improvement of didactic and pedagogical capabilities. Additionally, the creation of the PLC needs to be explained within this communicative statement and the benefits that it can have for the individual capabilities of the teaching staff of Zuyd. As individuals who are higher in the hierarchy express their support for the professionalization of didactic and pedagogical capabilities, teachers will be more likely to understand the benefit of the PLC. Additionally, this will also ensure that the

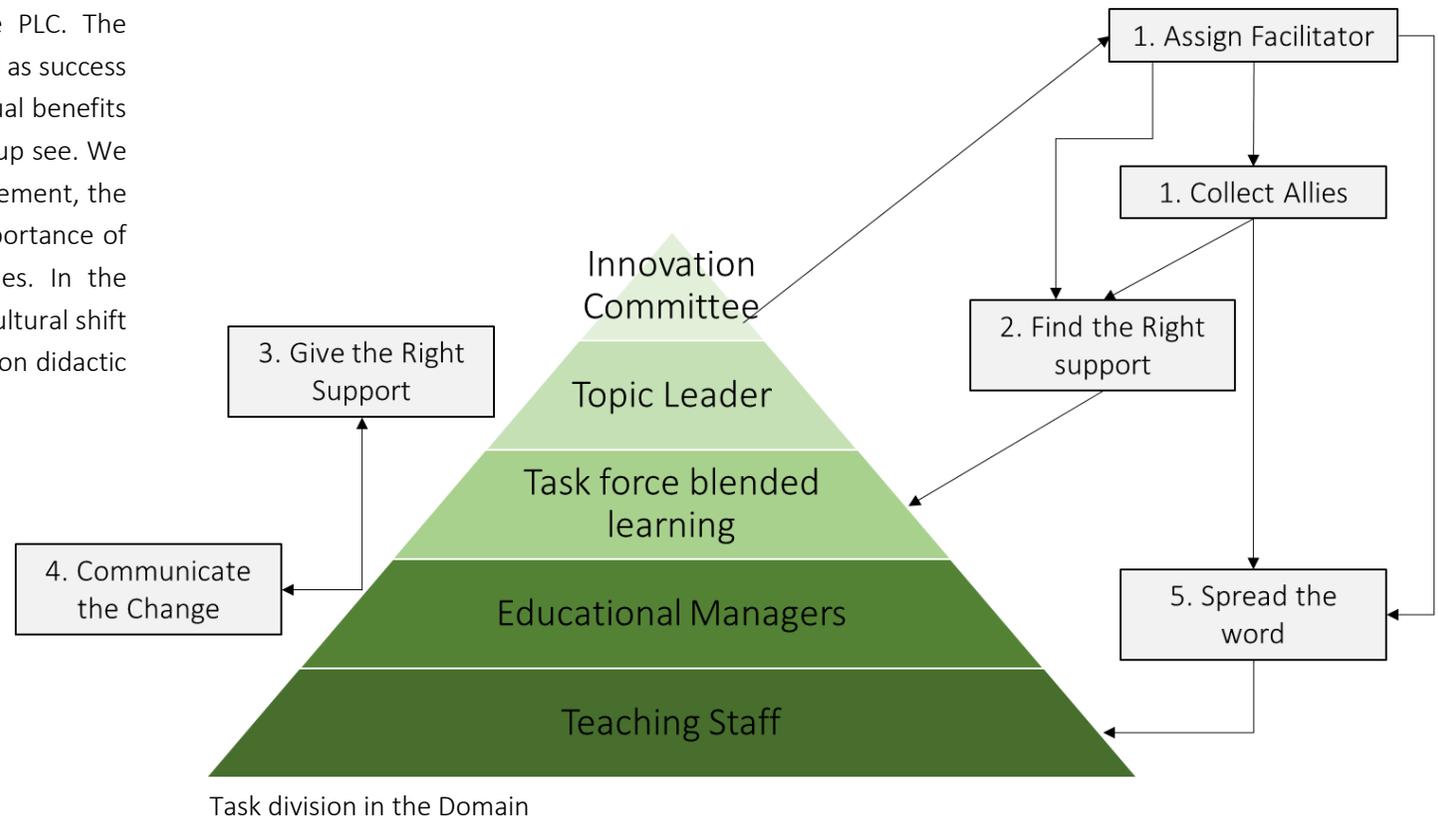
PLC will be seen as a viable option for further development of didactic and pedagogical capabilities.

Step 5: Spreading the Word

We believe that the instigators of this consultancy project, together with the core group and the facilitator, should use the **infographic** to explain the added benefit of this project to potential participants. By motivating a large group of colleagues to participate in the first meeting, **more information can be shared and more topics can be taken into account** in the creation of the sub-groups of the PLC. It is important that this step is taken **after the key stakeholders have been convinced** and the renewed focus on didactic and pedagogical capabilities is communicated from the HR department and the educational manager. This is due to the lower threshold that then exists as teachers will associate the PLC as a **potential solution** to the proposed focus on didactic and pedagogical capabilities.

Implementation: 5 steps to success

This leads to an increased **willingness to participate**. Specifically, the individuals in the core group should inform their colleagues by means of mouth-to-mouth information of the existence and the benefits of the PLC. The infographic can be used here as well as success stories from other PLCs and individual benefits that the facilitator and the core group see. We believe that this will improve engagement, the amount of participants and the importance of didactic and pedagogical capabilities. In the long run these steps can lead to a cultural shift at Zuyd, where increased focus lies on didactic and pedagogical skills.



Conclusion



Conclusion

The aim of this project was to explore the use and implementation of a professional learning community within the Domain of Health and Welfare at Zuyd University of Applied Sciences. Thereby, addressing the didactic and pedagogical differences between teachers that were made apparent after the switch to an online educational environment. In order to explore what a PLC can look like in Zuyd: literature and best practices were collected and evaluated, interviews were conducted and a SWOT analysis was performed. By analyzing these sources, recommendations were tailored to Zuyd on how to strategically position, organize and implement a PLC. Moreover, an infographic was developed to share this knowledge with potential participants and stakeholders, which can be used to convey the importance of a PLC. Thereby, the development of didactic and pedagogical skills gain importance within Zuyd and result in the inclusion of PLC into Zuyd's strategy as per our recommendation. Furthermore, another main recommendation

is to give the lead in organizing and facilitating the PLC to the taskforce blended learning. A facilitator needs to be assigned that understands the leadership capabilities needed to successfully guide a PLC. A diverse like-minded group of teachers should personally be approached by the facilitator to join the core group of the PLC. Additionally, when Educational Managers are approached by employees regarding their professionalization, the PLC should be posited as an opportunity for teachers to develop their pedagogical and didactic skills. Furthermore, the directors of the Domain, the taskforce of blended learning, as well as the PLC itself, should create a sense of urgency around the topic by means of clear communication and the strategic positioning of the PLC. Thereby, interest in the topic of didactic and pedagogical skills and blended learning can be enlarged. In addition, the educational managers and HR department need to be convinced of the importance of this project so as to increase the organizational support for

the PLC. Moreover, the right resources and systems need to be in place to ensure that the functions of the PLC can be executed correctly. We are convinced that implementing these recommendations will result in a successful establishment of a PLC in Zuyd, allowing teachers to enhance competencies on blended learning and didactic and pedagogical skills thereby further implementing the growth mindset in the employee population.



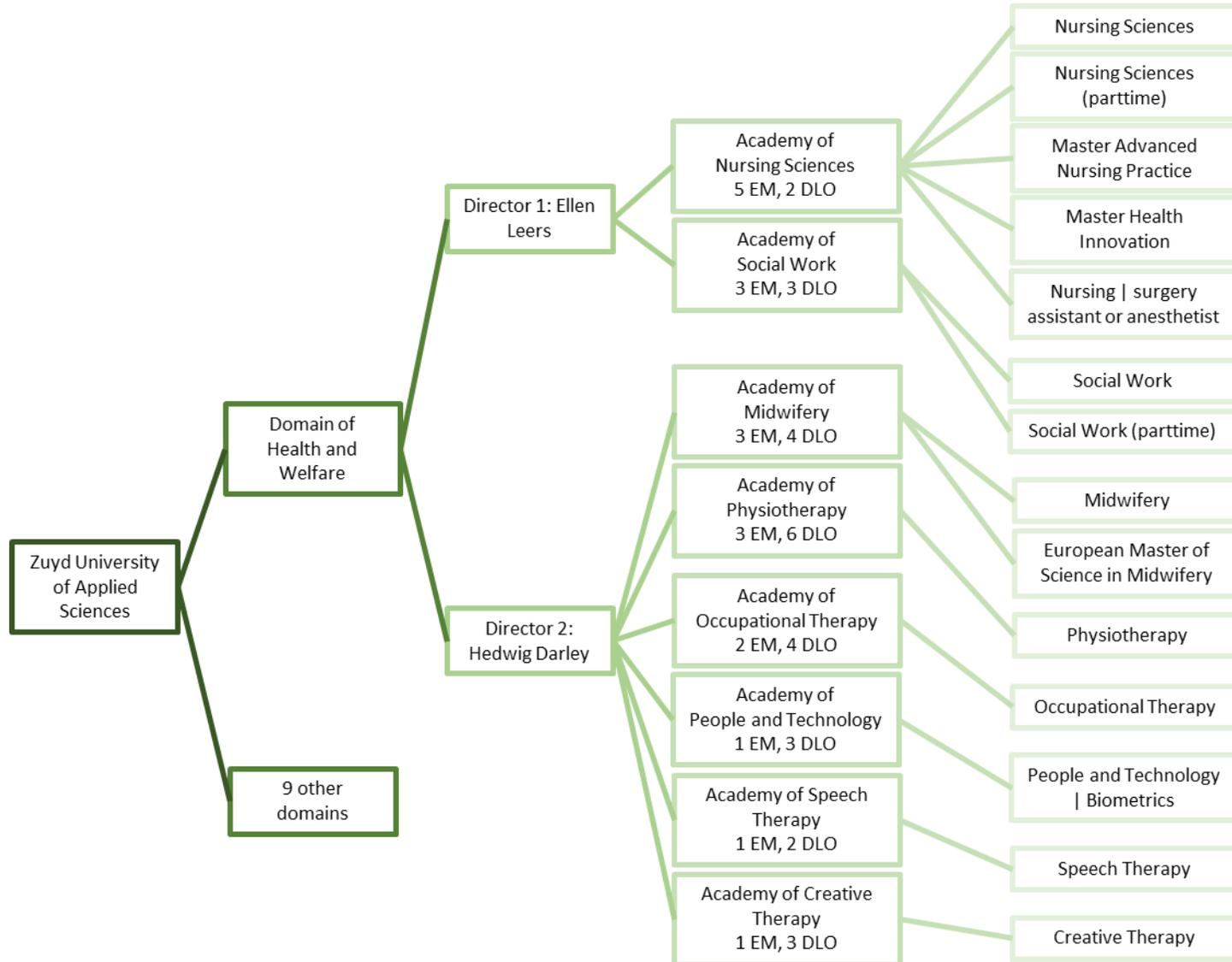
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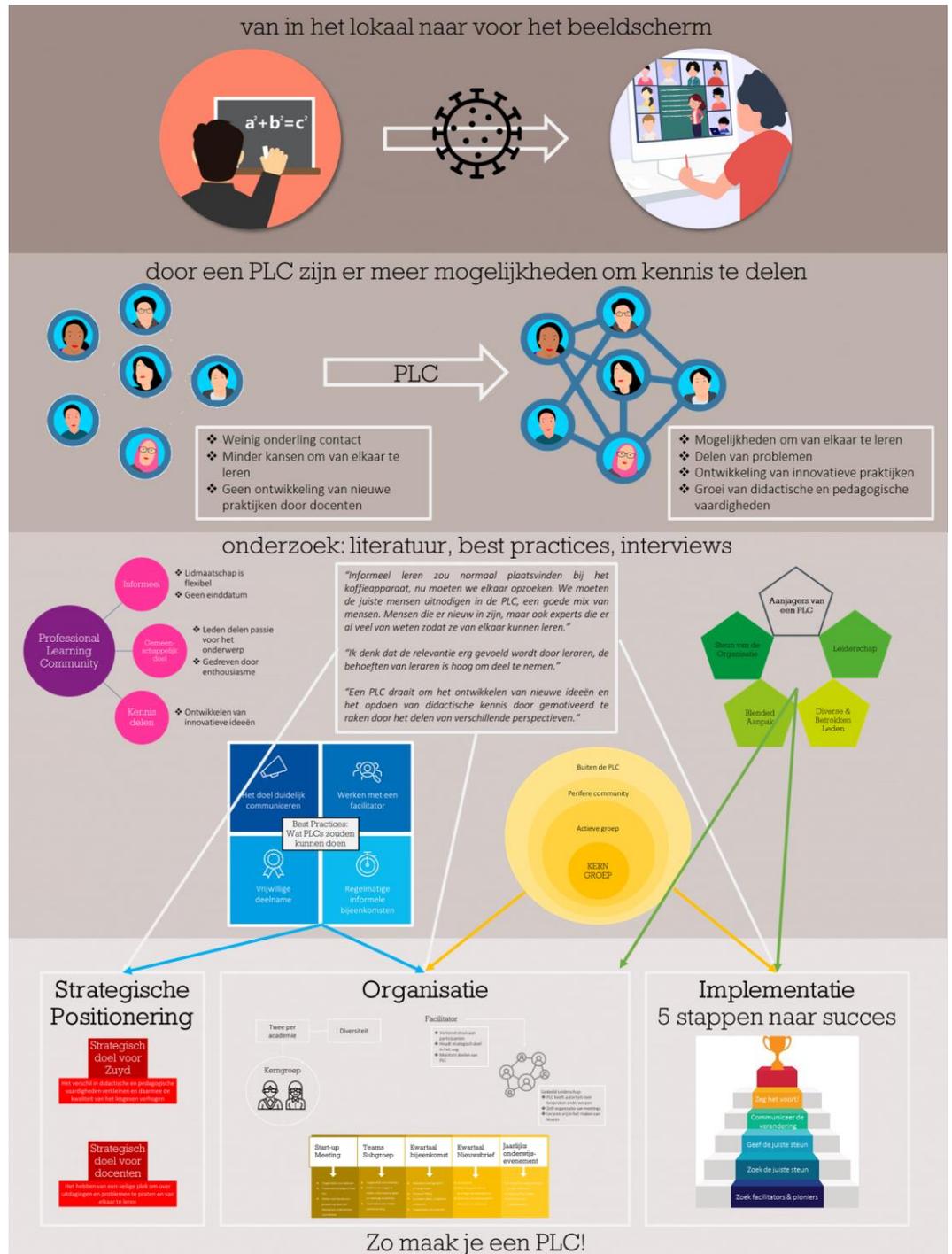
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Appendix A: Overview of the Domain



Appendix B: The Infographic



Appendix C: Interview Guideline

Block 1: What they think characteristics are of CoP → how do they see that?

What do they want from a CoP?

“We zijn op dit moment aan het kijken naar mogelijke oplossingen om jullie te helpen met het delen van jullie ideeën en het bedenken van oplossingen samen met collega’s.

- Hoe ziet u dit voor zich en hoe kunnen wij er voor zorgen dat u hier aan mee zou willen doen?
- Welke thema’s zijn volgens u belangrijk om besproken te worden binnen deze community of practice?
- Zou u zich comfortabel genoeg voelen om uw ideeën te delen?
- Welke huidige werkgroepen vind u goed verlopen op dit moment? Ook informeel? Met andere opleidingen/domeinen?

Wij zien dit voor ons als een team, of meerdere teams, van docenten die regelmatig bij elkaar komen om ideeën uit te wisselen, en om samen na te denken over hoe het onderwijs beter kan. Dit noemen wij een community of practice. In zo’n community of practice is het bijvoorbeeld mogelijk om groepsdiscussies en één-op-één gesprekken te kunnen voeren, over nieuwe ideeën te lezen, en gastsprekers te ontvangen.

- Wat zou u graag uit deze CoP halen?
- Zou u hieraan deel willen nemen?
 - actief: organiseren, discussiëren
 - passief: deelnemen aan workshops of bijwonen van gastcolleges
 - Niet
- Wie zou hieraan moeten deelnemen? Onderwijsafdeling (O&O), teachers, ...
- Niet alleen formeel, maar ook informeel?

Appendix C: Interview Guideline

What platform would they like to use?

“De CoP kan georganiseerd worden op verschillende manieren. We zijn aan het kijken naar hoe deze er uit zou kunnen zien.”

Hoe denkt u dat u deze meetings eruit zouden moeten zien?

- Hoe vaak? Hoe lang?
- Ziet u de bijeenkomsten van deze CoP het liefste online of offline?
- Welke platformen zou u het liefst terug willen zien?
 - Bijvoorbeeld ZuydNet, Microsoft Teams, ... ?

How would that CoP help you to deliver high quality teaching or to innovate teaching practices?

Which characteristics should a CoP really have to improve HQ teaching/innovative teaching? How should it look like?

Block 2: Enablers and inhibitors (Ask if there are factors that make it possible for CoP to flourish; ask what works well for task forces)

What motivates you to participate (or not)

- use 40 hours to participate in CoP?
- check learning preferences; would CoP support that? How do you normally learn something (approach)? Characteristics to make you go there

How do they spend the 40 hours and is it enough?

“We hebben begrepen dat iedere docent 40 uur per jaar krijgt voor deskundigheidsbevordering.

- Waarvoor gebruikt u deze uren op dit moment?

Where are they missing support

“Heeft u het idee dat u op dit moment genoeg gesteund wordt om online les te kunnen geven?”

- “Wat zou u verder fijn vinden om te krijgen qua steun en van wie?”

Why would you participate/ why not?

- Zou u die 40 professionaliseringsuren uur gebruiken om mee te doen aan activiteiten die georganiseerd worden door de CoP? Denk dan aan workshops over de combinatie van online en offline onderwijs, expert gastsprekers en plenaire discussies die georganiseerd worden.
- Zou u er aan mee doen als u meer uren kreeg voor deskundigheidsbevordering?

Appendix C: Interview Guideline

What are the challenges they are facing with online education?

“De switch van offline naar online onderwijs was niet makkelijk. Uit gesprekken met Peggy, Evelien en Marijke hebben we begrepen dat docenten soms worstelden met deze verandering.

Wat waren de uitdagingen die u tegen kwam?

Would the CoP have helped you with the challenges you faced with the Covid-pandemic?

→ see if they think it would've helped them; value.

Block 3: Relationship between PLC and increased teaching quality

Block 4: SWOT

What do you have in HZ that would make it work?

What factors at HZ will hinder this/CoP?

What are opportunities, what are threats? What is HZ good at?

What can they improve? → all in relation to CoP!!!

3: list of enablers/inhibitors and characteristics; if they do not come up with it, see if they are present or not, if they think they would be good or not →

SWOT → so they can talk a lot.

Appendix D: The Coding Table

| Interview Blocs | Categories | Variables | Subvariables | Literature | Questions blocks (full see interview guide) | Subquestions | |
|--------------------------------------|---|---|--|---|---|--|----------------------------------|
| | | | | | What should be the structure of the COP? How should it be organised? | | |
| | | | | | What should be discussed in the COP? | | |
| 1. Characteristics of CoP | General level | No set end date | | | | What do you think are characteristics of a CoP? | "What should the COP look like?" |
| | | Platform: best to have both | Virtual CoP Face-to-face CoP | Haas et al, 2020 | What platform would you like to use? | | |
| | Organisational level | Inviting external parties | | | Wenger & Snyder, 2000 | | |
| | | Identify existing groups | | | Wenger & Snyder, 2000 | | |
| | Team level | Informal atmosphere/ structure | | | | | |
| | | Team learning processes | Knowledge sharing | | | | |
| | | | Constructive conflict | | | | |
| | | | Co-construction | | | | |
| | | Member distinction | Core group | | | Wenger et al., ?; W&S 2000 | |
| | Active group | | | Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002 | | | |
| | Peripheral community member | | | ...; Muller, 2006 | | | |
| | Outsiders | | | Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002 | | | |
| | Individual level | Commitment | Students | | | Should students participate in the PLC? | |
| Feel connected to the task | | | Wenger & Snyder, 2000 | | | | |
| 2. Enablers and inhibitors | Organisational level | Organisational support | | | Wenger, 2000 | In what areas would you like to receive support? | |
| | | Resources | Monetary resources | | | | |
| | | | Time resources | | Wenger & Snyder, 2000 | How do you spend the 40 hours "deskundigheidsbevordering" now? Is it enough? | |
| | Team level | Preconditions team learning | Motivation by clearly structured purpose and goal/ strategic objective | | Probst & Borzillo, 2008 | | |
| | | | Psychological safety | | | | |
| | Leadership level; 2 types, both needed! | Shared leadership to ensure formation of blended learning | | | Small & Rentsch, 2010 | | |
| | | Community leader guiding C | | High trustworthiness | Muller, 2006 | | |
| | Individual level | Participant engagement | | | MacTavish & Kolb, 2006; B | What motivates you to participate? Why would you participate/why not? | |
| Engagement from broader organization | | | | Would other people be willing to join the group and is there enough time? | | | |
| 3. The whole model | Support vision&mission community, see value of actions | | | Haas et al, 2020 | | | |
| 4. SWOT | Relation CoP to high quality teaching/blended learning/innovative practices | | | | In what way would a CoP be helpful to increase teaching quality/blended learning/innovative practices | | |
| | Strengths | | | | What do you have at HZ that will make a CoP work? What are they good at? | | |
| | Weaknesses | | | | What can HZ improve for a CoP to work? | | |
| | Threats | | | | What could go wrong? | | |