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Exploring the Role and Possibilities for a Professional Learning Community in Higher Education: Insights from an English Language Centre in Oman

Submitted By
Badriya Ali Sultan Al Masroori

A dissertation submitted to the University of Bristol in accordance with the requirements for award of the degree of Doctorate of Education (EdD) in the Faculty of Social Sciences and Law
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Abstract

The concept of professional learning communities (PLCs) is widely researched and of growing interest internationally. In Oman, some research has been started recently at the school level. However, at the time of this study, no research has been conducted at the higher education (HE) level. Hence, the study took place at one university in Oman through an action research project lasting one semester. It aimed at establishing and evaluating a PLC to understand the first-hand experiences of the members of this community. The study used interpretivism and social constructivism in order to deeply analyse members' interactions and perceptions of the PLC. Data were collected via utilizing three tools: preliminary documentary analysis of the reports produced by Staff Development Committee, observations of PLC meetings, and semistructured interviews during and at the end of the semester.

The findings showed positive attitudes towards the PLC where the members could sense a supportive environment with considerable mutual respect and trust. All members were happy sharing their classroom practices, challenges and reflections, and learning from one another. Overall, the members found professional development (PD) sessions fruitful and they encouraged establishing a PLC along with the current PD program because the PLC directly spotlighted their needs. Although the members indicated the great potential of creating a sustainable PLC, their participation was challenged by several factors such as workload, time constraints, and technical issues. The members suggested many solutions to make the PLC a successful learning experience such as gaining managerial support, having more members with an assigned leader, being more active and going deep in professional learning. The findings of the study were discussed in light of pertinent literature and the Omani context. Implications for policy makers and educators were drawn from the findings.

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A big thank you to my friends for their warm wishes and beliefs that I can finish this study.

Last, but not least, I would like to thank all my teachers who passionately helped me fulfil the requirements of this study

Author's declaration

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the requirements of the University's *Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes* and that it has not been submitted for any other academic award. Except where indicated by specific reference in the text, the work is the candidate's own work. Work done in collaboration with, or with the assistance of, others, is indicated as such. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

SIGNED:

DATE: 11th September 2023

Abbreviations

HEI	Higher Education Institution
HE	Higher Education
ELC	English Language Centre
PD	Professional Development
SDC	Staff Development Committee
PLC	Professional Learning Community
NCSI	National Centre for Statistics and Information
EMI	English Medium of Instruction
BES	Basic Education System
GED	General Education Diploma
SQU	Sultan Qaboos University
UTAS	University of Technology and Applied Sciences
SAC	Sela-Access Centre
NCLB	No Child Left Behind
WFSGs	Whole-Faculty Study Groups
MS Teams	Microsoft Teams
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulations
BERA	British Educational Research Association
GFP	General Foundation Program
ELT	English Language Teaching

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Chapter 1: Introduction

“Meeting the needs of all students and providing optimum learning opportunities for students and staff is the focus of PLCs.” (Olivier & Huffman, 2016, p. 37)

1.1 The Nature of the Problem

My decision to undertake this study was influenced by my experience when I started teaching at a higher education institution (HEI). I remember how I struggled to conceive my classes so as to meet the diverse individual needs of my students. I had no difficulty with classroom management; my strong personality and confidence conveyed to my students that they were there to learn. However, I realized from my first day at class that classroom management does not ensure actual learning, and their learning should be improved.

My decision to investigate professional learning communities (PLCs) was influenced not only by this experience but also by my six years as a lecturer in English as a foreign language and my two years as a coordinator of one of the levels in the foundation programme in an English Language Centre (ELC) at a HEI in Oman. These two positions, as both an academic and an administrative member of staff, gave me a broad view of the struggles teachers face in their professional development (PD). In addition, another spark that ignited my motivation to investigate this subject came from my early work experience as a novice lecturer in the higher education (HE) context with no previous teaching experience. I was lucky to have some supportive colleagues whom I regularly consulted when I faced any challenges; but because their own teaching experience also proved to be limited, this was not enough.

In my current workplace, there is a committee called ‘Staff Development Committee’ (SDC) that is responsible for organizing PD sessions via contacting teachers and asking them to speak on topics that they think can talk about based on their experiences. These sessions are conducted at the departmental level. As teachers, we were required to attend those sessions, which were usually conducted on the last working day of the week in a time slot when no teachers had classes. They usually lasted for an hour. For administration purposes, attendance was recorded at the end of the session. The same procedure is implemented at the college level. PD sessions are organized for

academic staff from all departments and centres at the beginning of the academic year or during semester breaks for students. These sessions devoted general topics; and attendance at my institution was mandatory. I remember attending many sessions merely to fulfil administrative requirements (Trilaksono et al., 2019).

Although I was not employed until after the Arab Spring protests of 2011 witnessed in many Arab countries, an effect of those events was that I struggled to match the content of some of those PD sessions with my teaching needs. As will be discussed in Chapter 2, the number of students admitted to HEIs increased as a result of the Arab Spring protests; but this increase was not matched by increased development of human resources in these institutions (Al Riyami, 2016). Thus, many of the sessions did not address the challenges of furthering my students' learning. Because of the nature of PD, a widening gap had emerged between the content of our PD sessions and our teachers' actual needs and goals. For this reason, I began to seek out other options for professional learning and development, such as PLCs, which place students' and teachers' needs, rather than administrative needs, at the heart of their mission (DuFour, 2004; Henderson, 2018; Little, 2002).

This thesis does not claim that PLCs will solve all the issues related to staff and student learning. Instead, it provides a window into the possibility of establishing such communities, and the ways in which they can enhance the learning process and achieve the aims of the education system. One aim of the thesis is to enable establishing a PLC at the tertiary level in Oman. In particular, the study aims to examine the potentials and challenges of establishing a PLC from the teachers' point of view because of their direct contact and influence on students. Therefore, it argues that supporting teachers and engaging them in active and cooperative learning should be given the utmost priority (Hargreaves, 1994).

1.2 Rationale of the Study

The idea for this study originated in a class reading of Bolam et al.'s (2005) project in the UK on PLCs. Their PLC project discussed how staff worked collaboratively in order to learn collectively and develop professionally as teachers to enhance student learning. Similar communities have also

been created in different parts of the world for the purpose of developing institutions' performance and have had good outcomes. They are discussed in Chapter 3.

Though interest in creating and investigating PLCs worldwide has been growing (Stoll et al., 2006), research and publications in HE in Oman are limited in general (Almanthari, 2019), and particularly limited on subjects of PD and how to improve it and create more opportunities for professional learning. However, even the meagre literature on PD in the Omani context manages to address the challenges PD faces. For example, Al Riyami (2016) stresses that a key challenge facing PD is its nature as a top-down approach, in that PD sessions tend not to address issues that teachers actually encounter in real classroom situations. This argument is supported by a more recent study by Almanthari (2019), describing a context similar to that of the present study and indicating the significance of giving teachers an active role in the PD process. This role can be via selecting the topics of the PD sessions or giving workshops in which teachers are not merely listeners. They work together to learn new things. Therefore, to improve the current PD practices, it is evidently important to involve teachers when planning PD and to make discussions, feedback and reflections central to this process (Littlejohn, 2002).

As I pondered how to fully engage teachers in professional learning and development, the idea of creating a PLC took shape in my mind. Although PLCs have gained widespread attention recently, they do not have one fixed universal definition of this concept. One of the most common definitions of PLCs is that offered by Henderson (2018, p. 39), who defines them as “groups of educators working together with a collective purpose of high student achievement.” The concept originated in business field and was aimed at developing the ability of organizations to learn (Vescio et al., 2008). PLCs “may have shades of interpretation in different contexts” (Stoll et al., 2006, p. 222). In education, PLCs generally involve groups of teachers/learners who have the interest to improve the quality of the teaching and learning process and commit to working collectively towards this goal through regular meetings (see, for example, Bolam et al., 2005; Cowen, 2010; Dufour, 2004; Wenger, 1998).

The concept of PLCs suggests having collective and professional learning, and the aim of participating in PLCs is to help students learn better rather than determining what to teach them.

The focus is on student learning rather than the number of lessons taught implies that PLCs promote a shift from quantity to quality teaching that takes into account what students actually learn from their classes. Hipp and Huffman (2010, p. 12) took this perspective, observing that PLCs are promising for institutions that want to achieve ‘lasting reform’ because of their useful effects on staff and student learning. In PLCs, teachers collaborate and have the responsibility for leading and directing their own learning based on the needs of their students (Rodick, 2013; Sompong et al., 2015). This argument is discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

Moreover, members of PLCs collectively learn and support one another via sharing practices and reflections (Abbott et al., 2018; DuFour, 2004; Hipp & Huffman, 2007; Pang et al., 2016) that make the PLC experience a bottom-up instead of a top-down process. PLCs “support teachers in making decisions based on their contexts, their goals, current and new professional knowledge, and the needs of their students” (Vescio et al., 2008, p. 89).

To ensure their success and sustainability, many researchers spotlight several characteristics for PLCs such as Bolam et al. (2005) who list eight characteristics for the PLCs: 1) shared values and vision, 2) collective responsibility for students’ learning, 3) collaboration focused on learning, 4) individual and collective professional learning, 5) reflective personal inquiry, 6) openness, networks and partnerships, 7) inclusive membership and 8) mutual trust, respect and support. These characteristics contribute to the conceptual framework for the study. This is discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

1.3 Significance of the Study and Its Potential Contribution to Knowledge

This study seeks to make many original contributions to existing knowledge. First, many researchers criticize PD practices for their inadequacy and their top-down approach (Al Riyami, 2016; Almanthari, 2019; Borko, 2004; Fullan, 2007; Vangrieken et al., 2015), in which teachers are obliged to attend for the purpose of fulfilling top authority requirements (Trilaksono et al., 2019). Since the sessions tend not to address their real needs, teachers may not benefit from them. Since it is teachers in direct communication with students who form the core of the educational system, it is teachers who know the needs of their students and can identify those that can help them learn better. When teachers find the right opportunities to develop, this development

can help to improve the performance of the whole institution, which consequently leads to better student performance and results overall. As Day (2000, p. 110) describes it, “[t]o develop schools we must be prepared to develop teachers ... to invest in teachers.”

First, the study seeks to remind teachers of their crucial role in their students’ lives. Unlike PD, in PLCs, teachers are placed at the centre of the professional learning and development process (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Therefore, creating and participating in PLCs is found to be an opportunity for teacher investment, where they participate and collectively lead their own professional learning in order to meet students’ needs (Chauraya & Brodie, 2018; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Olivier & Huffman, 2016).

Second, the study examines the perceptions of members of a PLC in an English Language Centre (ELC) who teach first-year university students that have not been studied. In the words of Bosman et al. (2012, p. 8), “[t]he first year experience of a university student is significant, it can make or break a student and sets the tone for the remainder of their academic journey.” Investigating the perceptions of teaching staff at this critical stage of university life might inform decisions on how to assist teachers in professional learning and offering maximum support to meet the diverse needs of their students. This may help students to perform well not only during the foundation year, but also in the coming years as argued by Bosman et al. (2012).

Third, the findings of this study should provide insights for policy and decision makers on how to invest teachers’ abilities and skills to learn what they need and how to establish supportive work environments to maximize this learning and to support students in overcoming learning difficulties. Since many Omani HEI students are at the risk of being placed under probation or dropping out of the university due to their failure to meet the standards of passing their courses (Islam, 2014; Islam & Al-Ghassani, 2015), there is a pressing need to improve teachers’ professional learning so as to boost student learning and success.

Fourth, this study will contribute to the PLC literature in the Arabian contexts and contexts where PLCs either have not or have only recently been established. Although the idea of PLCs was formulated early in the last century in the works of John Dewey (Bolam et al., 2005), and

considerable research has been done in many countries, both in the West, such as the US (Hipp & Huffman, 2007) and the UK (Bolam et al., 2005; Stoll et al., 2006), and in Asia, including Singapore (Chauraya & Brodie, 2018) and Taiwan (Chen et al., 2016), little research has been done in Arab countries in general and in Oman in particular. I hope my own research will contribute to a deeper and richer understanding of PLCs through insights gained from the Omani context.

1.4 Research Aims and Questions

As stated above, the present study aims to:

- examine teachers' experiences when participating in an online PLC
- investigate teachers' perceptions and reflections on making a PLC a sustainable learning experience
- recommend ways for stakeholders to improve and utilise PLCs to develop professional learning and make informed decisions targeting student achievement.

To achieve these aims, the following questions guided this research:

1. What are teachers' experiences and perceptions after participating in an online PLC in the English Language Centre?
 - a. What benefits do teachers gain from participating in an online PLC?
 - b. What challenges do teachers face when participating in an online PLC?
2. Based on the strengths and challenges of participating in the PLC, how can it be improved and utilised to enhance both teacher and student learning?

1.5 Theoretical Foundation of the Study

Since the study focuses on PLCs, it deals with teachers' collaboration, reflection, and learning. Therefore, it stems its theoretical framework from the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky (1978, 1986), which stresses that learning is social. In this theory, the relationship between the body and the mind, and between the individual and the society, is mutual and dialectic. In other words, an individual and his thoughts both influence and are influenced by the society and culture

surrounding him or her. Vygotskian works based on this theory, as well as related works by other researchers, are discussed below in terms of some areas that are considered by this study below.

1.5.1 Social Interaction

According to Vygotsky (1978, p. 57), an act or a function “appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, *between* people (*interpsychological*), and then *inside* the child (*intrapsychological*)”. In other words, learning is a social process in which learning is manifested on two planes: between people and within individuals. This highlights the social nature of learning and the importance of social interaction in the learning process. In addition, in this quotation, Vygotsky explicates that learning occurs first at a social level, and then at an individual level, stressing that the formation and development of knowledge occurs via social interactions first (Mantero, 2002). What can be inferred from Mantero’s explanation of the theory is that social interactions assist people in constructing knowledge, meanings and perceptions. For this reason, some researchers consider the social constructivism paradigm the foundation of sociocultural theory (Damsa & Ludvigsen, 2016; Wang et al., 2011). Social constructivism aligns with the concept of PLCs because PLCs involve co-construction of meaning and knowledge among their members. For this reason, social constructivism represents the ontological approach of this study (see Chapter 4).

Also, Vygotskian work highlights that social interaction is key for human development (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). Just as children rely on the interactions with their caregivers or parents in order to learn and develop, somewhat older learners initially are taught by more experienced and knowledgeable people before they gradually start to take responsibility for their own learning and actively participate in those learning settings (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wertsch, 1985). Social interactions represent a key aspect of PLCs, in which shared reflections and experiences vitally assist members’ learning and development (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Pella, 2011).

Another concept important to the sociocultural theory in this study is the activity that forms the context for the social interactions to occur. Engeström (2015) indicates that when expanding the Vygotskian perspective that learning is social, three components are spotlighted: the subject, the objective and mediational means. In the present study, the subject is the teachers or members

participating in an online PLC. The objective is professional learning that can enhance students' learning experience and boost their achievement. The mediational means are the tools and signs that teachers use in the PLC, such as the MS Teams programme, reading articles, and the computer (see Chapter 4 for more details). The relationship between the subject, the objective, and the mediational means is reciprocal (Engeström, 2015), as the relationship among these three components in the online PLC in this study. Therefore, this cyclical relationship helps to explain the connection between an individual and his or her objective via the use of mediational means.

1.5.2 Mediation in Teaching and Learning

As highlighted in Section 1.5.1, learning occurs first socially and then within the individual. Thus, when people interact with others, those they interact with can mediate their mental processing either explicitly or implicitly (Wertsch, 2007). For this reason, learning is considered as a socially mediated process (Vygotsky, 1978). Mediation is a significant perspective of the sociocultural theory that involves using concepts, activities, and artefacts to regulate one's own and others' mental and social activities (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). According to Wertsch (2007), mediation can be either explicit (e.g., using books or worksheets to accomplish a particular task) or implicit (e.g., acquiring particular vocabulary when language is used spontaneously to do a certain task). In this study, where teachers interact in a PLC, we will observe them mediating their perspectives, thoughts, social practices, and interactions with other members of the PLC via the sharing of experiences, thoughts, reflections, and feedback.

In addition, the use of mediational means for the sake of learning is inseparable from the context (Engeström, 2015; Van Oers, 1998). The context is the environment in which people engage with their practices (Stein, 1998). Since learning is a sociocultural phenomenon that involves creating meaning from daily activities and experiences, learning that should not be decontextualized (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Stein, 1998). This is a critical point for this study, which asserts the importance of understanding the context of the PLC in order to understand how its members use and select mediational means such as activities to learn professionally.

1.5.3 Participation and Practice

A significant concept derived from sociocultural theory is that of participation and practice, within what are called 'communities of practice' (CoP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

According to Wenger (1998, p. 47), practice “gives structure and meaning to what we do”, and it has implicit and explicit dimensions. The implicit dimension refers to the rules and perceptions regarding practice, and the explicit dimension refers to the various tools and procedures used for different purposes within practice.

An important consideration for this study is that when people are engaged in practices, they should engage in relationships with others via the course of participation; hence, meaningful engagement in practice is a source for building identity via participation with others (Wenger, 1998). For Wenger (1998), participation defines people in social practices and places them in local contexts and communities. Thus, the community, time and the environment are all vital for meaningful learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Stein, 1998). In this study, a PLC is formed in which its members can participate and reflect on their practices in the time they set for themselves and based on the needs they identify from their context. Members share their stories and experiences that can provide meaningful learning opportunities for other members (Handley et al., 2006; Stein, 1998). When teachers participate in a PLC, they have the opportunity to learn in their workplaces; thus, PLCs provide a mechanism for understanding how teachers learn in a natural setting and how skills and knowledge develop via participation and interaction with others. Also, collective learning is key in PLCs (see Chapter 3), which matches with Wenger's view that participation and interaction with others helps develop mutual recognition of ones' own abilities and skills and improve “mutual ability to negotiate meaning” (1998, p. 56).

Although CoPs are based on sociocultural theory, one might think that they are the same as PLCs, but they are not. CoPs and PLCs do share many aims and practices, such as encouraging participation, viewing learning as a social process, that can develop via social interaction, and using different resources (e.g., books and computers) to mediate the learning process. However, in the famous work of Lave and Wenger (1991), CoPs are discussed in terms of their concept of ‘legitimate peripheral participation’. The concept of legitimate peripheral participation means that novice members in a CoP have limited participation at the periphery, and only move to the core and fully participate in the community when they get more experience. This process indicates unequal participation of the members in the same community. Handley et al. (2006, p. 3) refer to this as ‘socialization bias’. Wenger (1998, p. 57), in his discussion, likewise addresses the issue

of participation, distinguishing full participation from what he calls “mere engagement in practice” and suggesting many different levels of participation. However, it seems evident that having levels or degrees of participation can affect the relationship of the members of the community since peripheral participants may not have the same sense of belonging as that of full participants.

A sense of belonging, as well as mutual trust and respect are important characteristics of PLCs (Abbott et al., 2018; Cowen, 2010). These characteristics create a positive culture in which members share responsibilities and leadership and work together to achieve their goals (Henderson, 2018). So, another consideration for this study is that in a PLC, participation of all members is important (Hord & Sommers, 2008), and this participation should not be limited by factors such as length of experience. Though the participants in this study differ in experience, these differences did not affect the level of their participation in the PLC.

1.6 Outline of the Study

This thesis is divided into seven chapters, as described below.

Chapter 1 presents the problem and the rationale of the study. It also discusses its potential significance and how it hopes to contribute to existing knowledge. After addressing the basic aims of the research and posing the questions that need to be answered, it lays out the theoretical framework underlying the project.

Chapter 2 discusses the context of the study, with relevant information about Oman, its educational system in general, and its higher education system in particular. In addition, this chapter provides background information about the target research site.

Chapter 3 reviews the pertinent literature on professional development to provide context for establishing and developing of PLCs. Moreover, the characteristics and processes of PLCs are explicated, and this is followed by a critical discussion of the challenges and debates surrounding the implementation of PLCs.

In Chapter 4, the methodology of this study is presented by first highlighting its paradigmatic stance. Then, the research design is explained and some related aspects are highlighted. They are reflexivity, sampling, and data collection methods. Also, the chapter provides an explanation of how data were analysed and how ethical aspects of the study are considered.

Chapter 5 of the study presents the findings gathered from all data collection methods: documents, interviews, and observations.

In Chapter 6, these findings are discussed with reference to the relevant literature review and other comparable studies in the field of PLCs.

Chapter 7 presents the study's conclusions, addresses the strengths and weaknesses, and suggests implications for practice and recommendations for future research. It concludes with final remarks and reflections on the EdD journey.

Chapter 2: The Context of the Study

2.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the context of the study by presenting an overview of Oman and its educational system. After explaining the school education in the country, the chapter discusses higher education (HE) with a special reference to the research site and the current situation of professional development in higher education institutions (HEIs).

2.2 The Sultanate of Oman: An Overview

The Sultanate of Oman is an Arab Muslim country located in the Arabian Peninsula in the Middle East in Asia. Oman has an area of 309.000 km², making it “the second largest country in the Arabian Peninsula” (Al Ghatrifi, 2016, p. 25). The country has diverse landscapes: mountains, sands, gardens, valleys, and seas.

The year 1970 marked a significant turning point in the history of the Sultanate of Oman. Before 1970, Oman was considered largely unknown to outsiders because of its isolation and limited interaction with the world. The country lacked many basic services and requirements for a good life such as education, electricity, health services, housing and transportation. However, under the wise leadership of HM Sultan Qaboos (1970–2020), Oman witnessed significant changes and development in all aspects of life. Since 1970, Omanis and non-Omanis living in the country witnessed rapid developments in housing, electricity, healthcare and education. Regarding the latter, it is worth noting that Oman used to have only three schools.

2.2.1 Society

Recently, Oman’s population has increased significantly. In 2011, the total population was 3.3 million (National Centre for Statistics and Information [NCSI], 2018). This increased by more than one million, reaching 4.6 million people in 2019 (NCSI, 2020). About 2 million people are expatriates¹ (NCSI, 2020). This means that half of the population is made up of non-Omanis. The country, therefore, needs to become more self-sufficient instead of relying on foreign labour. For

¹ This term is used in the statistics of the NCSI to refer to non-Omanis.

this reason, the Sultanate has started implementing the policy of Omanization, which is addressed in Section 2.2.3

Islam is the official religion of Oman, where the majority of the population are Muslims (Al Ghatrifi, 2016; Al Riyami, 2016). Islam became the religion of Omanis who voluntarily chose to convert to Islam. This happened when the prophet Muhammad (PBUH) started calling for Islam more than fourteen centuries ago.

The country has a heterogeneous population. Its people originate from different areas and ethnicities that reflect “Oman’s historical past which included periods of empire and extensive trading with local and distant countries” (Ismail, 2011, p. 11). A proportion of the population comes originally from countries such as India, Pakistan, and Zanzibar, and these people brought with them the local languages spoken in those areas such as Urdu, Balochi, and Swahili (Al Ghatrifi, 2016). Arabic is the official language in Oman and the language of instruction in public schools.

Despite this rich linguistic diversity, English is the only official foreign language in Oman. English is spoken by many educated citizens because of the English medium of instruction (EMI) in HEIs. English is also the language of communication for people who come to work in Oman. This status is attributed to the influence of globalization², which makes English the world’s language and an important tool for modernization (Al-Issa, 2015; Al Hajri, 2013). Some scholars such as Al-Issa (2003) and Charise (2007) hold a different view of EMI and believe that it is not merely globalization makes countries such as Oman use English in HEIs. They argue that the reason is the post-colonial influence of the UK on the Gulf countries, including Oman, which were British protectorates. The UK indirectly colonized these countries by supporting them in areas such as infrastructure and the military; hence, English was used as a lingua franca and a medium of instruction (e.g. Al-Issa, 2003, 2006; Charise, 2007). The EMI literature comprises many arguments, but these are beyond the scope of this thesis.

² Globalization is a widely used concept that refers to the process in which borders, cultures, economies, customs, and social differences dissolve (Hirst et al., 2009).

2.2.2 Politics

The Albu Saidi dynasty has been ruling the country since the sixteenth century. Today, Oman is part of the Gulf Cooperation Council (Al Ghatrifi, 2016), which includes the countries in the Arabian Peninsula. In his rich review of the history of Oman, Common (2011) illustrates many facts about this country for the past three centuries. He explains that Oman was isolated from other gulf countries, but it had trading activities with East Africa, which made it independent in the nineteenth century. According to Common (2011), the country's interior regions for many years isolated from the coastal regions, and this situation did not change until HM Sultan Said bin Taimoor started to break this political isolation with the assistance of British forces in 1955. Common (2011) stresses that Oman was completely united when HM Sultan Qaboos bin Said started ruling the country in 1970.

As mentioned above, since 1970, the lives of Omanis have changed and become much better than they used to be. However, the Arab Spring that affected many Arab countries in 2011 influenced also Omanis (Al-Issa, 2015; Al Riyami, 2016; Worrall, 2012), and HM Sultan Qaboos responded positively to most of these requests. For example, 50,000 new jobs were created for Omanis, and more power was granted to the members of the Shura (consultation) Council who are elected by the people to represent them and interrogate the ministers concerning citizens' rights (Al-Issa, 2015).

Although the solutions that were provided by the Government at that time sounded promising, there are challenges and problems Omanis face that have not been sorted out. With the new era of development initiated under the leadership of HM Sultan Haitham, who came to power in January 2020, Omanis hope that their problems will be finally solved.

2.2.3 Economy

Like other Gulf countries, Oman has rich oil and gas reserves that have attracted the investment of many Western countries. Although Oman has started to import expertise, technology, and foreign labour to exploit these resources, it produces less oil than the neighbouring countries (Al Riyami, 2016). Thus, to maintain economic stability and development of Oman, the government started to look for other resources to exploit. The people are now encouraged to invest in other sectors, such as agriculture, fishing and tourism.

The Sultanate has also started applying the Omanization policy (Al Ghatrifi, 2016), that is the process of replacing the non-Omani workforce with competent Omani labour. This policy aims to make the country independent by relying on its domestic people to develop and progress. According to Al Ghatrifi (2016), the government is dedicated to applying this policy in various sectors, such as education, health and engineering. It is thus sending more Omanis abroad to obtain higher qualifications (NCSI, 2021) and be professionally qualified to serve the country.

2.2.4 Education

Until recently, education was very informal and traditional in Oman. People learnt in mosques and their small houses, with a very limited number of students attending formal education in the country's only three schools until 1970 (Al Ghatrifi, 2016). In other words, there were only three schools K-12 before 1970. However, when HM Sultan Qaboos came to power in 1970, education became one of the pillars that received great attention since the beginning of the Renaissance era. HM Sultan Qaboos pushed for formal education across the country, even if this meant studying under the shades of a tree while schools were being built (Al-Ghanboosi, 2017; Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2018).

2.2.4.1 School Education

Since 1970, the number of schools has increased dramatically to eradicate illiteracy and ensure that every child gets the opportunity to learn. As a result, the number of schools reached 2046 school across the whole country in the academic year 2019—2020 (NCSI, 2020). To improve the economy of the country and prepare qualified citizens, many reforms have been implemented in the educational system (Alnabhani, 2007).

In the past, school education started with a system called 'general education'. General education was divided into three levels: elementary (six years), preparatory (three years) and secondary (three years). Students had to pass all the years to move to the next level. Alnabhani (2007) highlights that each level had aims that correlated with students' needs for their age. The aims of the elementary level were mainly to assist students in developing healthy manners and develop basic knowledge skills. The preparatory level aimed to address students' psychological and social needs, enhance their abilities, and improve their skills to move to the secondary level. At secondary

level, the educational system focused on consolidating students’ mental, social and spiritual development needs of the students and preparing them for HE.

The general education system was transformed by a remarkable reform, which introduced the ‘basic education system’ (BES) in the academic year 1998—1999 (Al-Ghanboosi, 2017). This system is still followed today. In BES, school education is divided into two stages. The first one is basic education BES that has two phases: phase one (from grade one to four) and phase two (from grade five to ten). The second stage is the post-basic education (post-BES), which consists of grades eleven and twelve. A primary feature of BES is the application of experiential learning, which helps students develop communication and life skills, such as CV writing (S. Al Hosni, 2016). Also, English was introduced in BES as an international language (Al-Ghanboosi, 2017) and was allocated more classes compared to the general education system to prepare students for HE in which English is the medium of instruction. At the end of grade twelve, students obtain the General Education Diploma (GED) Certificate with which they apply for admission to HEIs. These stages are summarized in Figure 1.

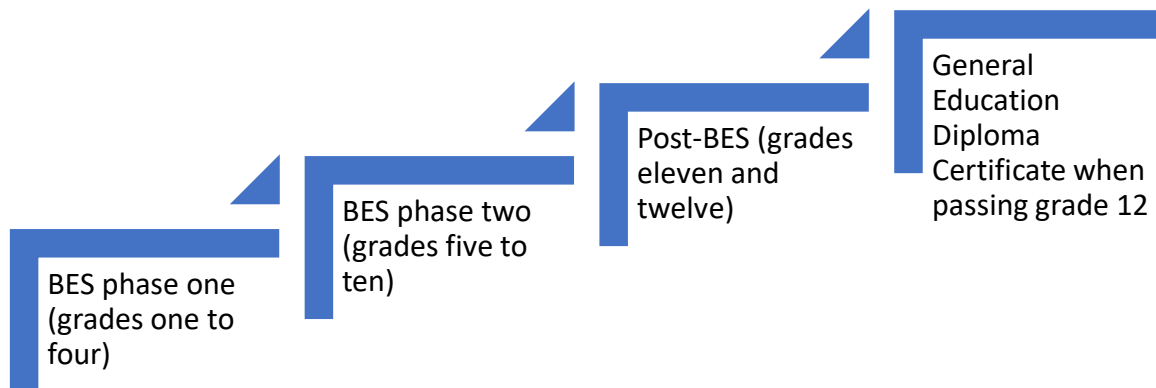


Figure 1: Stages of School Education in Oman

2.2.4.2 Higher Education

The establishment of HEIs in Oman was not started early compared to school education because the government focused first on ensuring that all children go to and complete their school education. The first public university was Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) that received its first batch of students in 1986. In the 1990s, the private sector started investing in HEIs and private colleges were opened (Al Ghatrifi, 2016). Since then, many public and private colleges and universities have been established to accommodate the increasing number of students who finish their secondary education to meet the needs of the job market. Some of the specializations offered by HEIs in Oman are education, medicine, administration, human resources, information technology, military sciences, engineering, agriculture and business (Al Riyami, 2016).

Despite the country's numerous HEIs, many Omani students have been unsatisfied with the quality of HE and the opportunities provided to school graduates to continue their education after they finish secondary school education. Al Hajri (2013) reports that many HE students demanded the government to increase the percentage of admission and lower some of the entry requirements for HEIs so that many students are enrolled to those institutions. As a result, most graduates from high secondary schools were secured places at HEIs because of lowering of the entry requirements (Al Riyami, 2016). Also, as per the directives of HM Sultan Qaboos, a 1000-scholarship programme was established to send Omanis abroad for postgraduate studies. The programme aimed to qualify Omanis so that they could replace non-Omanis in the job market. More information about those scholarships are provided in the website of the Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research and Innovation. The Author of this thesis has received a scholarship from the National Program for Postgraduate Scholarships from the Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research, and Innovation, which is based on the Omanization policy.

However, the academic year 2020/21 is marked with a significant drop in the number of students admitted to HEIs due to the economic and financial crisis Oman and other countries face due to Coronavirus pandemic. Approximately 31,000 students were enrolled in HEIs from around 39,000 students who passed the GED exams (NCSI, 2021, 2022).

Another remarkable change that took place in August 2020 was the merging by royal decree of the country's seven Colleges of Technology with the six Colleges of Applied Sciences (NCSI, 2021) to form the University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS). UTAS is the second public university in Oman after SQU; and it is managed by its university council. Before this merger, the Colleges of Technology were under the supervision and management of the Ministry of Manpower (which was converted to the Ministry of Labour in 2020), while the Colleges of Applied Sciences were managed by the Ministry of Higher Education (which was renamed the Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research and Innovation in 2020). The formation of UTAS will be a positive fact if it increases the quality of education to produce strong outcomes and competent graduates. Increasing the HEIs intake, which Omanis demanded during the Arab Spring, should be accompanied by offering quality HE to students and promoting student learning. As mentioned in Chapter 1, this study aims to develop staff professional learning to boost student achievement. Thus, one of the UTAS colleges served as the site for the study.

2.3 The Research Site

The study was conducted in one of the branches of UTAS in 2020/2021. As highlighted in Section 2.2.4, the merger of the Colleges of Technology and Colleges of Applied Sciences took place in August 2020. So, the present study was conducted on the first academic year of this merger. Consequently, a lot of changes occurred at the academic, administration, and organization levels. The following paragraphs describe the situation in the research site at the time of conducting this study, without addressing the changes that occurred later because they are beyond the scope of this study.

The academic year consisted of three semesters: fall, spring and summer during the time of conducting the study. Due to the merging of this college with other institutions, it is expected that some changes in its educational system and administration will take place in the coming years. This section provides an overview of the branch at the time when data collection took place. It is worth noting that anonymity of the branch is maintained to ensure confidentiality of data and the safety of the researcher and the participants.

The college has an English Language Centre (ELC) and an Educational Technology Centre. It also has three academic departments: Engineering, Information Technology and Business Studies. Each department offers a range of specializations. In these departments, students can obtain a diploma (two years), an advanced diploma (three years), or a bachelor's degree (four years) based on their grades in the final foundation level they studied at the ELC.

The ELC is the starting point of students' HE journeys. It is equipped with a self-access centre (SAC) that contains hundreds of resources for students to develop their English competency. Also, the ELC multimedia laboratories where some classes are held, and where students can use computers during class. Students are also allowed to use these laboratories when they are empty to finish their projects and tasks. In the ELC, first-year students learn English, mathematics and information technology. The centre offers two programs: the foundation programme and the post-foundation programme.

2.3.1 Students

After students graduate from secondary school and receive their GED Certificate, they apply to the HEIs of their choice online via the Higher Education Admissions Centre. Students are distributed to various HEIs and specializations based on their grades in secondary school. Every year, the students who are admitted to the college where this study was conducted take an electronic placement test during orientation week to test their English language skills. Based on their scores, they are assigned to the four levels of the foundation programme that indicate their level of English. Each level is taught in one semester. So, students spend between one and four semesters in the ELC. Students who score over 86% on the placement test qualify for the advanced test, and if they pass it, they can immediately start their specialization courses (Almanthari, 2019). The same procedure is also followed for mathematics and information technology. However, during the academic year 2020—2021, when data were collected for this study, students did not take the placement test due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Instead, they were distributed across levels based on their scores on the GED Certificate. To move to the next level, students must pass the level exit exam they undertake at the end of the level they studied.

The scores in the level 4, the final level of the foundation programme, determine whether students qualify for a diploma, a higher diploma, or a bachelor's degree. For example, if the students get a high score in level 4 exit exam, they are permitted to study for a higher degree. They can obtain an advanced diploma or a bachelor's degree, depending on their scores in the exit exam. When students start their specializations and move to study in their departments, they take more English courses from the ELC. These are the four courses that form the post-foundation programme. They are Technical Writing I, Technical Writing II, Technical Communication and Public Speaking, which students take alongside their specialization courses.

The ELC in this college was the site of this research and the place where a professional learning community (PLC) was created. The centre was selected due to the vital role that ELCs have in students' academic lives; these centres "act as a critical transition stage to prepare students to join the new phase in their lives" (Al Riyami, 2016, p. 27). About 80% of students admitted to HEIs require a foundation year to study English, as well as core computer and numeracy skills, before they can start their majors in English (Al Hajri, 2013), which reflects the fact that ELCs receive the largest number of students admitted to HEIs that calls for increasing the efforts to provide the best quality of education to students and the necessity to meet their various needs.

2.3.2 Academic Staff

Due to the large number of students the ELC receives every year, it recruits the highest number of teachers among other academic departments. At the time of data collection, the ELC had mostly teachers recruited directly by the Ministry of Manpower (which has been recently renamed the Ministry of Labour) and some teachers were recruited via agencies. According to the data shared by the Department of Human Resources of the target institution with me, the number of recruited academic staff in the ELC was 83 teachers in AY 2020/2021. There were 17 teachers recruited by the Ministry with permanent contracts and 65 teachers were recruited by employment agencies with contract that can be renewed every two years. The teachers had several different nationalities, such as Omani, Tunisian, Indian, Egyptian, British, Pakistani, Turkish, Bangladeshi, and Filipino.

About 76% of teachers held master's degree and 13% had doctoral degrees. The rest held a bachelor's or diploma degree with an international teaching qualification such as the Certificate in

Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (CELTA) and the Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) qualification. Table 1 illustrates academic staff information during the study period. To conduct this study, 12 teachers participated at the beginning of the study. More information and the participants is presented in Chapter 4.

Table 1: Number of the ELC Staff and their Academic Qualifications

Academic Qualification ³	Number of Teachers
PhD	11
Master's	64
Bachelor's	8
Diploma	1

2.4 Professional Development in HEIs

Oman has identified human resources development as a key factor for economic growth (Common, 2011). As indicated in Section 2.2.3, Omanization policy has an impact on driving efforts towards staff learning and development. However, there is no clear policy in HEIs for PD (Al Aufi, 2014). In some Omani HEIs, staff professional development (PD) activities are organized at a ministry level (Al Ghatrifi, 2016). Unlike the regular training sessions managed at the school level by the Ministry of Education, the PD sessions in HEIs are not systematically organized (Al Riyami, 2016). In general, teachers in HEIs are involved in presentations and workshops with their colleagues, and the institutions organize symposia and conferences and invite staff from other HEIs to participate or attend. However, these events are not regular, and they are organized by the institution itself. For this reason, the absence of PD policy calls for a need to pay more attention to this area and have more organized learning opportunities (Al-Lamki, 2009; Al Aufi, 2014; Al Hosni, 2019) where academic staff have voice on what to focus on to improve the performance of the institutions.

³ Source: Department of Human Resources in the target Institution

What can be inferred from the studies of researchers such as Al Ghatrifi (2016), Al Riyami (2016), Almanthari (2019) and Al Hosni (2019) is that current PD practices in Omani HEIs in general and in the target institution in particular is that PD is a top-down system that marginalizes the uniqueness and voices of teachers. This is because PD is planned by people who are at the administration and management level, and who may thus not have been lecturers before. Furthermore, these PD sessions are conducted based on the availability of presenters rather than on the actual needs of teachers. As a result, lecturers are put in a situation where they have to attend PD sessions and accept the information they receive just to fulfil administrative requirements (Almanthari, 2019; Trilaksono et al., 2019). In some sessions in the target institution, teachers get certificates of attendance after those sessions. Also, they get certificates of participation when they deliver presentations or workshops to their colleagues.

As highlighted in Section 2.3.1, teachers in the ELCs deal with many students who have different needs. Consequently, they also have needs that must be addressed to meet their students' needs and improve their learning (Bolam et al., 2005; Chen et al., 2016; Vescio et al., 2008). This is why the standard top-down PD sessions are inadequate for teachers to learn and develop professionally. After examining the current PD activities and teachers' views on them, (Al Hosni, 2019) stresses the need to have ongoing activities for PD in which teachers are involved. An online PLC was thus created to verify how teachers would experience and perceive this kind of professional learning.

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter described the context of this study. It highlighted some social, political, and economical aspects of Oman. Then, it discussed the educational system of Oman at the school and HE levels. After that, it presented the research site and the state of PD in HEIs in Oman, explaining the need to establish a PLC and examine teachers' experiences in the PLC. The following chapter reviews the literature on PLCs.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I present a review of the literature on professional learning communities (PLCs). First, I discuss teacher professional development (PD) to provide background and context for the development of PLCs. This is followed by an explanation the concept of PLCs and how they have developed. After that, I elucidate the characteristics and processes of PLCs. In the last part of the chapter, I highlight the challenges and debates facing the implementation of PLCs.

3.2 Teacher Professional Development

Due to the influence of education in many aspects of life, the Sustainable Development Goals set by UNESCO (2017) to be met by countries by 2030 the call for ‘quality education’. Student learning is a central aim of educational reforms in different parts of the world. To achieve this goal, teachers must learn to make adjustments in classroom practices (e.g. Hipp & Huffman, 2007; Zhang & Pang, 2016). When teachers are left without guidance, teacher learning can be difficult. Therefore, policy makers and educational researchers have been encouraged to provide professional development opportunities to enrich teachers’ knowledge and develop new practices (Borko, 2004; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

Teacher professional development has been described as “a complex process, which requires cognitive and emotional involvement of teachers individually and collectively, the capacity and willingness to examine where each one stands in terms of convictions and beliefs and the perusal and enactment of appropriate alternatives for improvement or change” (Avalos, 2011, p. 10). This definition highlights three critical elements that contribute to teachers’ PD: cognitive involvement, willingness to learn, and commitment to action. The need for these elements implies that teachers have to be actively involved in the PD process. Supporting these elements is the argument of researchers such as Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) who stress that active engagement and group support can lead to a collective impetus to engage in improved practices and instructions.

PD is an umbrella term that refers to different experiences and programmes. These can range from workshops and sessions to observations of other teachers’ classes to individual and group

reflections on teaching practices to informal conversations between teachers about their practices, with effectiveness of these experiences and programs varying widely (Borko, 2004; Thacker, 2017). These conceptualizations of PD indicate that development can occur at an individual level or group level. However, the individual or personal level received limited attention in the literature on teacher PD. Easton's (2008) article, for example, focused on professional learning and development at the individual level, whereas Borko (2004) and Thacker (2017) argued that PD in education involves a structured program that is delivered to a group of learners, for example inviting experts to seminars for in-service teachers.

Because of the fragmented nature and perceived inadequacy of PD sessions (Trilaksono et al., 2019), PD often has negative connotation among teachers, which has led some scholars to suggest changing the term 'professional development' to 'professional learning' (e.g., Easton, 2008; Fullan, 2007). PLCs have been suggested as alternatives to top-down PD programs (Vangrieken et al., 2015) that teachers attend to fulfil the demands of top management rather than to meet personal needs or interests (Trilaksono et al., 2019). This call for reconceptualization aligns with the present study, which aims to establish a community of professional learning to support PD programs (see Sections 1.2 and 1.3). The following section addresses PLCs in depth.

3.3 What are Professional Learning Communities?

Many concepts and terminologies have been used in the literature interchangeably to illustrate the notion of teachers' collective development and learning within communities. Although the concept 'professional learning communities' is used by many researchers (e.g., DuFour, 2016; Vescio et al., 2008), there are variations of this concept in different settings that use such communities for different purposes. For examples, some researchers call them 'communities of practice' (e.g. Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), 'teacher professional communities' (Levine, 2011), and 'networked communities' (Jackson & Temperley, 2007). Also, as part of a large project, academics from University College London ran workshops to train school teachers, in professional communities in the UK, called 'Research Learning Communities' (RLCs) (Brown, 2017; Rose et al., 2017). Their basis was using educational research to improve teaching practices by working on given materials and mapping progress and influencing practices and experiences. According to Brown (2017), RLCs engage teachers in a facilitative learning environment in RLCs where they

can link their knowledge to research, to develop research-based practices. Moreover, some universities refer to such communities as ‘Faculty Learning Community’ (FLC), as it is the case in a state university in the USA (Ward & Selvester, 2012) and an English medium university in the UAE (Engin & Atkinson, 2015).

3.3.1 What the Professional Learning Community Concept Denotes

The term ‘professional learning community’ emerges from the concept of the learning organization that was first described by Senge (1990). A learning organization is a place in which “people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together” (Senge, 1990, p. 3). When this definition is applied in educational settings, it means that staff continually seek to improve their learning and work on it via inquiry and reflection.

The focus of PLCs is not on individual professional learning, but rather on collective professional learning. Some researchers have unpacked the term ‘professional learning communities’ and analyzed its meaning. Cowen (2010) provided a comprehensive explanation of the three words of the concept. At the heart of the concept is the word ‘learning’. Cowen attributed this central position of the word to the significance of learning in institutions and stressed that it includes both student learning and the learning of the adults who are responsible for student learning. Cowen went on to explain that the word ‘professional’, which is used as an adjective to modify ‘learning communities’, describing how learning should be undertaken. Teachers should learn derived from well-regarded resources that will help them to work more effectively for their students. The word ‘community’ indicates that professional learning requires a supportive environment that fosters respect, trust and dialogue, as well as commitment to student development and learning. The focus on community stresses the need for reciprocal supportive relationships among those engaged in learning and the development of shared values and norms (Stoll et al., 2006). Working within communities reduces boundaries and isolation among staff as they can seek support and aid one another as they learn. Furthermore, having a sense of community leads teachers to feel increased motivation, high levels of work satisfaction, and a greater sense of group responsibility for student learning than when they work in isolation (Louis & Kruse, 1995).

When the three words ‘professional learning community’ are combined, they denote a foundation for collective and continuous learning that is guided by collaboration and respectful mutual relationships among members of the community. This foundation is missing in top-down PD programmes that address general issues that may not be directly related to what teachers actually need. Furthermore, PLCs emphasize the two assumptions Vescio et al. (2008) identified. The first one is that knowledge is situated in teachers’ daily practices, and the second is that active teacher engagement boosts professional learning and student learning. These assumptions are highlighted later in this chapter in the sections that treat PLC characteristics and the debates about PLCs.

3.3.2 Development of the PLC Concept

The PLC is not a new concept. In the early twentieth century, John Dewey addressed some of the components of PLCs, including inquiry, problem solving and reflections on practice, and argued that educational practices provide subject matter and problems that invite inquiry (Bolam et al., 2005). In addition, the widely-cited influential work of Schön (1983, 1991) stressed the importance of being a ‘reflective practitioner’, highlighting the need for inquiry in practice. This perspective highlights the importance of focusing inquiry and reflection on teachers’ actual practices and needs. Good and Weaver (2003) argued that this focus is evident in legislation such as the *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) in the USA. NCLB has led to increased teacher training and the preparation of teachers with high qualifications via the creation of communities that focus on teachers’ needs. However, Good and Weaver (2003) did not explore all the implications of NCLB act, in particular, controversial consequences such as a lack of educational accountability and racial and ethnic inequality (e.g. Darling-Hammond, 2007), which are beyond the scope of the study at hand.

The term ‘professional learning community’ is found in the works of practitioners working in the field of education and those who support schools, such as Hord (1997) whose project was funded by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement in Texas the USA, and Hipp and Huffman (2003, 2007) who continued Hord's (1997) project. Based on their work for the American Educational Research Association, Kruse and Louis (1993) identified the characteristics of PLCs and developed a model that schools can use to establish PLCs. Some of the advantages they

highlighted were the development of collective responsibility among teachers to enhance students' performance, personal commitment of teachers toward their work, and flexible leadership to improve learning in the institution. Such findings are emphasised in a Chilian context by Avalos-Bevan and Bascopé (2017). Supporting this conceptualization and after investigating the impact of professional communities in the Minneapolis public schools in the USA, Seashore et al. (2003, p. 3) wrote:

By using the term *professional learning community* we signify our interest not only in discrete acts of teacher sharing, but in the establishment of a school-wide culture that makes collaboration expected, inclusive, genuine, ongoing, and focused on critically examining practice to improve student outcomes (italics in original)

Many studies in other contexts support this conceptualization and recognize the impact of PLCs in teacher learning and hence, students' achievements. For instance, Hassan et al.'s (2018) study in Malaysia asserts the need for teachers to be part of a PLC to achieve excellence in teaching and students' learning. Also, in a high school in Singapore, it was found that teachers regarded the PLC as an opportunity to find out and focus on their students' needs and their learning needs (Chauraya & Brodie, 2018).

Such examples of support for PLCs are interrelated because they all aim to achieve one key goal: bolstering professional learning for the sake of enhancing student learning and achievement. Establishing a PLC for the first time in the Omani context and examining its members' experiences was the present study's orientation. This is because although several PLCs have been established many years ago worldwide, there are still contexts such as the Omani context that do not have formal PLCs in their higher education (HE) institutions that can help change some policies and develop the performance of the institutions. So, the findings of studies done in different contexts can be used as a starting point to launch such communities and explore them in a fresh context such as the Omani context, as indicated in Chapter 2. Thus, the present study sought to learn the extent to which collective responsibility exists for enhancing student learning and sharing vision and experiences to achieve this goal. The next section explains this goal in more detail.

3.4 Benefits of PLCs

Many institutions that have previously identified their policies of professional development as top-down have shifted towards creating bottom-up PLCs in which teachers have an active role in identifying the skills they need to develop to boost the learning of their students (Abbott et al., 2018; Henderson, 2018; Trilaksono et al., 2019). PLCs were created to overcome the weaknesses of PD and support it (see Section 3.2). They give equal importance to both group learning and individual learning to help teachers develop skills and knowledge through interaction with other members in the PLCs (Bolam et al., 2005; Dufour, 2004; DuFour, 2016; Senge, 1990; Stoll et al., 2006) and through reflective inquiry using many ways as asserted by Bolam et al (2005). This is discussed in Section 3.5. In addition, Easton (2008, p. 756) encapsulates the motives for establishing PLCs saying that teachers “must know enough in order to change. They must change in order to get different results. They must become learners, and they must be *self-developing*” (italics in original).

Furthermore, PLCs offer opportunities for reflecting on how to improve one’s learning and practices (Bandura, 1986; Hipp & Huffman, 2007) Reflection is an important skill that can contribute to self-development (Easton, 2008). In examining the development of PLCs in five schools, Louis and Kruse (1995) found that a positive school environment increased teachers’ sense of responsibility for improving student learning and collaboration with their colleagues to develop themselves and their practices. Supporting this conclusion are Andrews and Lewis’s (2007) findings that participation in a PLC not only expands teachers’ knowledge but also develops their classroom practices.

Evidence of the positive influence’ of PLCs is also found in a study conducted in North Carolina schools by Strahan (2003). In this three-year study, Strahan (2003) examined ways to improve students’ reading skills by engaging teachers in PLC collective learning activities and discussions. By the end of the study, teachers who participated showed great willingness to develop practices and skills related to self-selected reading and guided reading. Furthermore, students’ scores increased from 50% to 75% during the study period. This rise was attributed to teachers’ participation and engagement in PLC activities. Strahan's (2003) study is an example of good research. It provides readers with a rich description of the research site and the methods used for

collecting data. That increases the validity of the research findings (Creswell, 2014; Tracy, 2010). However, participants' teaching and learning experiences were not addressed at the beginning of the study, which would have allowed a before-and-after assessment of their behaviours.

In a recent study that investigated the need for developing a PLC in three schools in Thailand, Sompong et al. (2015) applied action research and recruited over 700 teachers and administrators in all phases of establishing PLCs in their schools. The phases included gathering background information on school contexts, visiting model schools that had PLCs, creating PLCs, holding workshops for discussions and reflection on learning and, finally, evaluating PLCs and their effect on school development. Over the course of the study, "teachers' behaviors changed, as the teachers gave importance to preparing students more than before." (Sompong et al., 2015, p. 2794). The effectiveness of the PLCs was measured quantitatively, using questionnaires only. Although this study had a large number of participants and the researchers provided rich explanation of the phases of the action research, they did not indicate the length of the study. That would have been useful information for researchers seeking to develop PLCs in other contexts. Supplementing the questionnaire findings with qualitative sources of data (e.g., interviews and observations) would have been a useful way to dig under the numbers stated in the study.

PLCs offer a positive environment for sharing practices and identifying teachers' needs. Such positive environments can contribute to high student achievement, which has motivated many researchers to investigate PLCs in many contexts (see, for example, Chauraya & Brodie, 2018 in Singapore; Sari et al., 2018 in Indonesia; Zhang & Pang, 2016 in China). When teachers' needs are placed at the centre of professional learning and development, positive results are observed. This is an important rationale for shifting from professional development to professional learning (see section 3.2).

3.4.1 PLCs in Higher Education

Similar to PLCs in schools, PLCs in higher education (HE) are not new. They have proved effective and beneficial in various settings since they first appeared in colleges and universities (Mooney, 2018). Notably, at the HE level, PLCs expand to cover topics that various institutional levels require, in addition to improving teaching and learning practices that include organisational

change and administrative improvements. Many studies that take place in HE settings emphasise the findings of studies that occurred at the school level, in terms of enhancing the culture of sharing, collaboration and strong relationships among staff. Section 3.5 highlights these positive results of PLCs and discusses their characteristics. The following paragraphs discuss research that has investigated HE PLCs.

Tahir et al. (2013) conducted a study in three universities in Malaysia, using questionnaires to gather feedback from 245 academics on implementing PLCs in their universities and analysing the data. The results reflected participants' satisfaction with such implementations. The study emphasised the significance of establishing PLCs for the sake of enriching the culture of sharing among staff, "in every educational institution whether school-based or tertiary level in order to create effectiveness and improve the academics' morale and satisfaction" (Tahir et al., 2013, p. 111). Furthermore, the study highlighted the importance of having collegial relationships that PLCs can strengthen, through sharing values, solutions to problems and creative practices among academics. The researchers also indicated that PLCs can serve as a tool for building strong bonds between the administration and academic staff, leading to more commitment to work and improve professional skills.

Moreover, such universities as Walden University in the United States apply the virtual PLC experience. In Walden university, Bedford and Rossow (2017) aimed to study academic staff experiences and the impact of PLCs that use synchronous and asynchronous strategies to meet participants' varying needs. The researchers focused on the influence on the members' classroom practices and collegial relationships as a result of participating in the virtual PLCs. The PLC discussions occurred over four weeks, aiming to connect staff socially and encourage them to share teaching and learning best practices for use in online settings. Each PLC accommodated up to 15 members. Their feedback, gathered by distributing a survey to PLC members, showed their positive attitude towards PLCs and reflected their ability to learn and apply new practices in their classes. Moreover, Bedford and Rossow (2017) argued that PLCs provide a means of enhancing participants' sense of belonging, by sharing practices and collaboration and, hence, functioning as a professional learning activity.

Supporting these two studies is a longitudinal study that Abbott et al. (2018) conducted recently. The researchers used several data sources to investigate the impact of participating in PLCs on teachers in nine adult English as a Second Language (ESL) programs in Canada. When the participants engaged in collegial environments that supported and assisted professional learning by using peer-reviewed articles that they had selected, they were more likely to co-construct knowledge. Participation in PLCs also promoted improvements in ESL practices, such as using stories in classrooms and teaching vocabulary in new ways. The authors attributed these improvements to the teachers' increasing awareness of and ability to identify their students' needs (Abbott et al., 2018). The participants also demonstrated confidence gained after engaging in PLC readings and discussions.

In addition to enabling discussion of research on topics that participants directly derive from classroom practices, forming PLCs can support applying certain strategies that the administration introduces to enhance the institutions' performance by improving the quality of teaching and learning. For instance, in California, USA, Ward and Selvester (2012) examined a PLC, it was called a Faculty Learning Community (FLC), created to introduce staff to adopting accessible technologies to help students access the curriculum. The FLC provided many workshops to enable staff to learn more about such technologies. A significant point this study highlighted concerned its funding, which enriched the FLC by making possible continuous technology training sessions. Also, the university provided physical resources in the form of labs. This administrative support for the FLC ensured its continuity in enhancing members' knowledge and experiences related to applying accessible technologies in their curriculum. The results indicated that from participating in the FLC, the members gained many benefits that improved their teaching practices and enabled their students to access the curriculum and improve their learning. The researchers suggested providing more administrative support by giving FLC meetings priority in faculty schedules, to enable regular attendance at such meetings. A very important point this study can spotlight is the influence of administrative support on PLCs. Such support influences both the design and outcomes of the PLCs in an HE context, as well as other contexts, such as schools. For instance, receiving enough funding ensures adequate resources for PLC activities, projects and workshops, resulting in staff development and organisational improvement and, hence, achieving institutional goals.

Another study took place in the United Arab Emirates. Engin and Atkinson (2015) investigated staff participation in a PLC (operating as an FLC) whose aim was to implement the use of iPads as a new teaching tool. Similar to Bedford and Rossow's (2017) study, the FLCs in this context used a mixture of face-to-face and online components to discuss various issues and propose solutions. The researchers established the PLC under study and were also members. Blogs in which the eight members of the PLC shared their experiences, researchers' notes on meetings and a questionnaire distributed at the end of the PLC collected the study data. The findings showed the PLC's effectiveness, especially in terms of collegiality and cooperation to support one another, though the members highlighted the need for more members, to maximise its effectiveness. Since the present study took place during the coronavirus pandemic, the target institution shifted to online teaching and adapted new teaching technology for this purpose. Thus, similar to the Bedford and Rossow (2017) study, staff in the target context received training on how to use the technology. More details appear in Chapter 4.

The researchers also found an HE institution in Hong Kong using technology as a tool for professional learning and development. In this institution, Lai et al. (2016) investigated an initiative to create a PLC to introduce staff to digital teaching portfolios. The study gathered data by using a questionnaire, semistructured interviews and teachers' portfolios. The results showed that engagement occurred "in the process of developing course portfolios with colleagues teaching the same course, as staff members could contribute teaching resources, ideas and reflections and share with one another directly" (Lai et al., 2016, p. 10). Also, the researchers stressed that sharing digital teaching portfolios could contribute to improving teaching and professional learning.

The focus of the PLCs in HE is not limited to improving the institution's environment and culture or facilitating new practices to improve teaching and learning. The PLCs can function as a tool for organisational development. For instance, in a study investigating five PLCs in a Canadian college, Mooney (2018) recruited and interviewed 10 participants with different roles and responsibilities across the college. The study aimed to understand what PLCs meant to them and the PLCs' influence on their learning and classroom practices. They shared the curiosity to develop and learn. The PLCs' number of active members, longevity and impact on members' practices qualified those

PLCs as successful. Interestingly, the findings showed that “the learning communities served not only as sites for professional development, but also formed microcultures within the institution, which, over time, influenced educational (academic) and organi[s]ational (administrative) change, both in policy and in practice” (Mooney, 2018, p. 38). This finding indicates the influence of the PLCs that can serve as an assistive tool, not only for developing teaching and learning practices but also for improving policies and creating changes at administrative levels.

Similarly, in a Chinese context, Zhao (2013) asserted that PLCs should be a means of changing the cultures that encourage isolation among staff, as is the case in China, by focusing on the management system. In other words, Zhao argues that organisational management can improve through creating PLCs with shared and distributed leadership. Teachers from different specialisations can assume leadership duties to organise several academic tasks in their institutions. Notably, the researcher spotlights the need to have ‘academic research teams’ (Zhao, 2013, p. 1368) to improve the organisation. Such teams will have the opportunity to do research in their respective specialisations and develop their skills. This study is crucial for the Omani context, in terms of raising the importance of staff expertise in PLC design and outcomes. After examining staff perceptions of the PLC (the present study’s aim), policy-makers can benefit from staff HE expertise and specialisations and form several PLCs within the institution. Those PLCs can create staff opportunities to carry out different research and projects that can contribute to the institution’s development.

In addition, the studies highlighted above indicate that PLCs can improve classroom practices and teachers’ professional learning, which can lead to bolstering student learning. Additionally, these studies highlight a critical aspect of PLCs—namely, the more they address teachers’ needs and the more actively teachers participate in professional learning environments, the more they develop and achieve their learning goals and, therefore, support student learning and achievement. The participants in Wood's (2007, p. 290) study “began to think of themselves as primary agents for necessary changes in teaching and learning. In order for their students to achieve more, they knew they needed to be constantly learning”. In the Omani context, as well as many similar HE contexts worldwide, policy-makers, such as administrative staff, must think of staff needs in terms of their working conditions. In the Omani HE context, creating PLCs should address part-time staff needs

by having flexible meeting times to increase the level of all its members' PLC engagement. Also, mixing PLC groups with full-time and casual or part-time members can bring more discussions and experiences to the meetings.

Also, the studies cited above point out the significance of having such characteristics as collegiality, trust and willingness to share ideas and propose solutions to support other members. These characteristics also occur in studies at the school level (Louis & Kruse, 1995; Sompong et al., 2015; Strahan, 2003), indicating that whether at a school or a tertiary level, the PLCs share many similarities, such as their characteristics and aim to achieve similar goals, by helping members to learn professionally. Thus, the following sections discuss the characteristics that Bolam et al. (2005) addressed because they are comprehensive and include the strengths and features highlighted in studies at schools and HE institutions. In HE contexts, the characteristics of sharing ideas, collegiality and collaboration can expand to include staff from various specialisations. PLCs are not necessarily limited to members from one specialisation. Interdisciplinary PLCs can have members from different disciplines who carry out innovative research projects to arrive at better outcomes for their institutions. Such interdisciplinary PLCs can apply in the Omani context, where HE institutions have many disciplines and staff from different countries.

3.5 Characteristics of PLCs

Many researchers have conceptualized characteristics and constructs for establishing PLCs. Hord (1997, p. 21) identified PLCs as communities of teachers who meet to learn collectively with “an undeviating focus on student learning”. In a review, she identifies five characteristics of PLCs, namely: 1) supportive and shared leadership, 2) collective creativity, 3) shared values and vision, 4) supportive conditions and 5) shared personal practice.

The attributes that Hord (1997) identified were explored further by Bolam et al. (2005) in a large-scale study conducted in the UK. The researchers examined the process of establishing and sustaining PLCs in 393 schools. A survey and students' scores were used to select 16 research sites. Based on an extensive review of the literature and several sources of data, such as interviews with stakeholders and observations at the research sites, the researchers pinpointed eight

characteristics of effective PLCs. They are: 1) shared values and vision, 2) collective responsibility for students' learning, 3) collaboration focused on learning, 4) individual and collective professional learning, 5) reflective personal inquiry, 6) openness, networks and partnerships, 7) inclusive membership and 8) mutual trust, respect and support. These characteristics are explained below, using the two reports produced by the research team (Bolam et al., 2005; Stoll et al., 2006) that illustrate those eight characteristics.

Shared Values and Vision

One of the key characteristics of PLCs is the sharing of values and vision related to student learning among all staff of an institution (Bolam et al., 2005; Hord, 1997; Louis & Kruse, 1995; Stoll et al., 2006). This is because “[v]alues and beliefs guide the behaviour of individuals no matter where they work or in what endeavor” (Hord & Sommers, 2008, p. 8). This sharing can involve addressing cultural values, ideas, and beliefs (Schaap et al., 2019) that are directed to a primary future goal and mission, that is, improving student learning (Hipp & Huffman, 2010). Furthermore, Henderson (2018) shows that all staff must share the belief that every learner can learn and will learn. To emphasize this characteristic, Hipp and Huffman (2010) highlighted the significance of having a ‘collaborative vision’. The construction of the vision and goals of the institution should be collaborative and not imposed by one person/director and other staff to generate the energy needed to drive the institution forward. However, developing shared values may be challenging when school staff have diverse values and cannot agree upon shared values. Trilaksono et al. (2019) pointed out that establishing the identity of an institution requires a shared understanding of its goals.

Collective Responsibility for Students' Learning

The second characteristic of successful PLCs is that staff take collective responsibility for student learning (Bolam et al., 2005; Stoll et al., 2006). This, as a result, leads to staff commitment as no one has more pressure than others. All members work together and none are isolated from the institutional community. This characteristic, as stressed by Bolam et al. (2005) and Stoll et al. (2006), also implies that the basis of staff discussions on how to improve student learning and boost students' achievements should be the sharing of learning strategies and student data. However, collective responsibility can be challenging to achieve. What if some members of the

community are more active than others? How should teachers be treated if they rely completely on their colleagues in the learning process and hardly participate in PLC discussions? Every staff member should participate and responsibility should be equally divided (Murphy & Lick, 2005). In an investigation of the development of PLCs in Thailand, Sompong et al. (2015) identified a strategy that boosted the participants' motivation to work collectively in PLCs: shifting the roles of each group member so that each member took on various responsibilities and was recognized by other colleagues for the work that they did. The researchers indicated that the use of this strategy made the participants satisfied and proud to be in PLCs.

Collaboration Focused on Learning

Collaboration is of great importance in PLCs, where staff are involved in group activities to support each other in learning professionally and improving student learning. Collaboration can take place through the sharing of materials, the joint planning of lessons and discussions of students' progress (Bolam et al., 2005; Stoll et al., 2006). Pang et al. (2016, p. 241) observe that “[c]ollaborative learning capacity is the most significant subscale that contributes to the PLC practice”. When teachers work in teams, they engage actively in posing questions that ignite deep learning and lead to higher student achievement (DuFour, 2004). In a study conducted in Chili, teachers were found to have a positive view of collaboration, whether it was formal (e.g. peer observations) or informal (e.g. casual conversations among staff on professional themes); collaboration was an important social element in the implementation of the PLCs that were examined (Avalos-Bevan & Bascopé, 2017).

Individual and Collective Professional Learning

The first three characteristics of PLCs are the presence of sharing, collective work and collaboration. The fourth characteristic, discussed here, is the presence of both individual learning and group learning are addressed. As mentioned above, Bolam et al. (2005) and Stoll et al. (2006) stressed the significance of formal and informal professional learning opportunities in building knowledge.

Reflective Personal Inquiry

Reflective personal inquiry is an important characteristic of PLCs. Such reflection is focused on the identification of ways to improve the teaching and learning process. This can be done by using student data to highlight issues related to learning, conducting action research on class practices, collaborating with staff from other institutions and listening to students' opinions on their expectations of a good lesson (Bolam et al., 2005; Stoll et al., 2006; Vescio et al., 2008). As Chauraya and Brodie (2018) noted, reflective inquiry can also be developed by asking critical questions on the issues important to a given PLC, searching for justifications, and challenging views and assumptions. Reflection is an important learning skill for personal and professional growth and development.

Openness, Networks, and Partnerships

Being open to others' ideas and ready to form networks and partnerships with others are vital characteristics of members of PLCs. Forming networks with other staff in the institution and partnerships with other institutions can open up opportunities for sharing and generating ideas (Bolam et al., 2005; Stoll et al., 2006). In Taiwan, forming clusters and networks can be an important way of making positive changes in cultures that encourage isolation and discourage support and collaboration (Chen et al., 2016).

Inclusive Membership

This characteristic suggests that teachers are not the only members of PLCs. Such communities involve all supporting staff in institutions, including technicians, managers, and administrative staff (Bolam et al., 2005; Stoll et al., 2006). PLCs enable all staff to work together, support each other and be aware of their institutions' shared values and goals.

It is worth mentioning that the studies discussed above show that the PLC scale can differ in different settings. Although a PLC may have a large number of members, as it was the case in Sompong et al.'s (2015) study, it can include a small number of members, as it was the case of many studies, especially the ones done in HE institutions (Bedford & Rossow, 2017; Engin & Atkinson, 2015). Also, in some PLCs, the members include various staff with various responsibilities. For instance, in Mooney's (2018) study, the five investigated PLCs involved

educational developers, faculty members, administrators, and support staff, and they were reported successful. The small number of PLC members can be attributed to the nature of HE institutions where there are many courses and different needs of staff such as how to use certain teaching and technological strategies. Also, the different working timetables of staff may be a reason for having small numbers so that they can meet regularly. However, the members of such PLCs believe that having more members can increase the effectiveness of these PLCs (Engin & Atkinson, 2015). As highlighted in Section 3.4.1, PLCs in HE can include members from many disciplines and with different working modes such as full-time and part-time staff.

Mutual Trust, Respect and Support

Building good relationships among staff is a key characteristic of successful PLCs. When there is reciprocal respect, trust and support, staff become willing to share their practices (Bolam et al., 2005; Stoll et al., 2006). This does not mean having strong personal relationships with every colleague. Instead, what is important here is that staff receive professional responses and support when they face challenges; this helps them to develop confidence (Stoll et al., 2006). Although developing trust can take a long time, once it exists, it empowers staff to overcome challenges such as being criticized, de-evaluated or reported on (Younger & George, 2013). Successful PLCs eventually result in having staff members who listen to and support each other.

Collegial trust and respect along with other constructs such as shared vision, shared and supportive leadership and shared practices are found to be vital in China (Chen et al., 2016). Furthermore, Antinluoma et al. (2018) emphasized the significance of having supportive relationships among colleagues in the creation of effective PLCs in a Finnish context. Such collegial relationships establish a positive culture that encourages staff to learn collectively. In the American (Hipp & Huffman, 2007) and Indonesian (Trilaksono et al., 2019) contexts, positive relationships and a positive work environment allowed staff to share their viewpoints and responsibilities without fear of punishment or retribution.

The characteristics of PLCs identified by Bolam et al. (2005) are intertwined, and some of them overlap. For example, the last three characteristics are important to the establishment of what Hord (1997) refers to as “supportive and shared leadership”. Thus, many important points that need to

be taken into account when creating PLCs. First, to create a positive and supportive environment, there should be transparency and openness among administrative and teaching staff as they move towards a shared, overarching goal: high student achievement. Second, Bolam et al.'s (2005) inclusive membership attribute involves not only the teaching staff but also other support staff (e.g., governors and administrative staff). This characteristic is intertwined with the previous characteristic of establishing partnerships and networks. Third, both Hord (1997) and Bolam et al. (2005) agree on the necessity of collaboration and sharing ideas and practices among staff. These elements result in the creation of the positive environments necessary for collective professional learning and development. When staff trust, support and respect each other, they share their visions, reflections and experiences and collaborate to reach their goals. For this reason, many studies address the influence of positive workplace cultures on the success and sustainability of PLCs (e.g., Antinluoma et al., 2018; Chen et al., 2016; Hipp & Huffman, 2007; Trilaksono et al., 2019).

The studies described above show that collaboration, a positive environment and collective responsibility for staff and student learning are vital elements of a collective culture. In a recent book, DuFour et al. (2021) confirmed the importance of these characteristics mentioned above and highlighted the importance of a 'cultural change' in the establishment of a substantive and successful PLCs. Such changes are not easy and do not occur rapidly, but they are possible. DuFour et al. (2021) offer a comprehensive discussion of the features that institutions must improve to become PLCs and suggest how to bolster the improvement process by constantly assessing the ability of staff to meet the vision and mission of the institution, that is, ensure that students are learning. They provide a detailed table in their book that can be used as a guide for creating and strengthening PLCs.

The characteristics described above also reflect the nature of PLCs. The development of PLCs is a continual process that cannot be divided into stages. The conceptualization of Hord (1997) and Bolam et al. (2005) challenges that of Hipp and Huffman (2003). The latter divided PLCs into three stages of PLC in their study: initiation, implementation, and institutionalisation. Hord's (1997) and Bolam et al.'s (2005) conceptualization of PLCs is more realistic and convincing

because institutions do not remain at a given performance level on a long-term basis. The resources and conditions that are supportive and beneficial today may not be ideal tomorrow.

The characteristics addressed above are supported by Hord and Sommers (2008). In their book, they identified five characteristics of PLCs: 1) shared beliefs, values, and vision, 2) shared and supportive leadership, 3) collective learning and its application, 4) supportive conditions and 5) shared personal practice. These are the same attributes that Hord singled out in 1997, as mentioned above. The only difference is that “collective creativity” became “collective learning and its application” to better define the key purpose of PLCs. The primary aim of a PLC is to determine what teachers should learn and how the members of the PLC should meet student learning needs (Hord & Sommers, 2008).

In addition, Hord (1997) and Hord and Sommers (2008) stressed the need for supportive conditions in PLCs. Supportive conditions are not among the eight characteristics of PLCs identified by Bolam et al. (2005). Supportive conditions refer to factors such as time, physical requirements and resources needed to support the process of collective learning. The characteristics of openness, networks, trust and respect outlined in Bolam et al.'s (2005) study were addressed by Hord and Sommers (2008) in their discussions of the supportive conditions as relational factors that aid in interpersonal development and increase the level of caring among the PLC members. Table 2 summarizes the characteristics of the PLCs discussed in this section with example studies that addressed those characteristics.

Because they offer a comprehensive way of identifying and evaluating PLCs , the characteristics identified by Bolam et al. (2005) will form the basis for investigating a PLC in the present study. They will be used during data collection and data analysis to understand teachers’ experiences as well as the practices of collective professional learning (see Chapter 4). One might argue that these characteristics do not address the ‘supportive conditions’ that are suggested by researchers such as Hord (1997), Hord and Sommers (2008), and Schaap et al. (2019). Although a supportive environment is not among the eight characteristics listed by Bolam et al. (2005), they cite the development of supportive conditions as one of the four processes required when establishing PLCs. This is highlighted in the following section.

Table 2: Characteristics of PLCs and Studies that Highlight them

Characteristics of PLCs	Studies highlighted the characteristics	Example researchers who pointed out the impact of these characteristics on the success of the PLCs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • supportive and shared leadership • collective creativity • shared values and vision • supportive conditions • shared personal practice 	Hord (1997)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Henderson (2018) - Hipp and Huffman (2010) - Murphy and Lick (2005)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • shared values and vision • collective responsibility for students' learning • collaboration focused on learning • individual and collective professional learning • reflective personal inquiry • openness, networks and partnerships • inclusive membership • mutual trust, respect and support 	Bolam et al. (2005) Addressed by the same group of researchers in Stoll et al. (2006)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pang et al. (2016) - Avalos-Bevan & Bascope (2017) - Chauraya and Brodie (2016) - Trilaksono et al. (2019) - Engin & Atkinson (2015)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • shared beliefs, values, and vision • shared and supportive leadership • collective learning and its application • supportive conditions • shared personal practice 	Hord and Sommers (2008)	

3.6 Key Processes in the Establishment of PLCs

Although the literature identifies the attributes of successful PLCs, the frameworks that outline how to create PLCs do not explain how to incorporate those attributes. The Whole-Faculty Study Groups (WFSGs) model is a comprehensive framework for establishing PLCs. It was developed by Murphy and Lick (2005). Murphy and Lick (2005) referred to WFSGs as PLCs with two key elements:

- the active involvement and commitment of every member of the faculty to the aim of improving the institution and enhancing students' learning, and
- the identification of student needs as the reason why the faculty need to sharpen their skills and knowledge, reflect on their teaching and take responsibility for their students.

The researchers described WFSGs as a circle of action research that is centred on student assessments and student outcomes. They also identified the following principles to guide WFSG: “students are first, everyone participates, leadership is shared, responsibility is equal, and the work is public” (Murphy & Lick, 2005 p. 14). If the WFSGs are to be successful, all members of the faculty must participate in 4-to-6-member study groups to work collectively on the instructional needs of the students. As Murphy and Lick (2005) highlight, the purpose of these small groups is to foster student learning. Their visualization of WFSGs as an action research process aligns with the characteristics that Bolam et al. (2005) and Stoll et al. (2006) stress in their projects. In a comprehensive description of how staff can create and develop PLCs in their institutions, four processes are addressed (Bolam et al., 2005; Stoll et al., 2006). They are elucidated below.

3.6.1 Optimizing Structures and Resources to Promote PLCs

The development of PLCs is influenced by how resources are organized and allocated in institutions. Lack of time and money can hinder the development of PLCs. Staff may not have full control over these factors. For example, staff have limited control over the quality of buildings. In contrast, they have substantial control over timetables and the allocation of time for PLC activities. Also, when institutions receive funding, this positively impacts the spaces and resources that support professional learning. Because of the need to consider supportive resources when creating PLCs, some researchers, as mentioned above, consider such resources essential characteristics of PLC (e.g. Hord, 1997; Hord & Sommers, 2008).

3.6.2 Promoting staff professional learning

Promoting staff learning is the core mechanism of PLCs (Bolam et al., 2005; Stoll et al., 2006). This can be done by encouraging staff to attend both external PD courses and attending sessions that are organized within institutions. Such courses and sessions provide staff with opportunities to interact with one another and learn collectively. Also, professional learning is promoted through peer observations that are made to help colleagues learn and improve.

3.6.3 Evaluating PLCs Over Time

Evaluation is essential and critical to ensure the sustainment of PLCs over time (Bolam et al., 2005; Stoll et al., 2006). In Sompong et al.'s (2015) study, evaluation was performed by first determining the expected outcomes and then evaluating the existing outcomes that have resulted

from the implementation of PLCs and soliciting staff reflections on the implementation. However, the authors did not describe the details of the evaluation plan or the items that were evaluated. Although evaluation is not widely practised in PLCs, it can contribute to developing and maximizing good practices (Bolam et al., 2005; Pang et al., 2016; Stoll et al., 2006). Guskey (2014) provided a comprehensive framework for the evaluation of PLCs. He laid out five levels for evaluating professional learning, which are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3: The Five Levels of Professional Learning Evaluation (Guskey, 2014)

Evaluation Level	What is measured
1. Participants' reactions	How the participants feel about the physical settings of the activity, their experiences, whether the activities used make sense to them, and whether they find them useful
2. Participants' learning	What new skills and knowledge participants gain from a program or activity. Indicators and measures of successful learning should be defined before the activity takes place. Also, negative consequences should be anticipated as well as positive results.
3. Organizational support and change	Whether the changes at an individual level are supported and recognized by the institution and whether resources are available to permit participation in a program or an activity.
4. Participants' use of new knowledge and skills	The quality of the implementation of the activity or program. Progress and implementation of new ideas can be time-consuming. Therefore, the participants should be evaluated at multiple time points because this is a gradual process.
5. Student learning outcomes	How students progress and perform. National standardized exams are insufficient to determine student learning. Teachers prefer to use their own assessments as they are timely and provide relevant information about new strategies (e.g. classroom assessments and portfolios). Affective and behavioural aspects of student performance may be significant as well.

Each of these levels reveals different information that can be gathered using different methods, but the levels are all intertwined. For instance, the feelings and reactions of participants influence their learning. Their learning, in turn, is strongly impacted by the organization, which can hinder or foster the learning in PLCs.

In addition, these five evaluation levels should be considered when planning PLCs. Guskey (2014, p. 1230) argued for “backward planning” using these five levels of evaluation, that is beginning

with level 5 and going backwards from there (see Figure 2). This ordering aligns with the literature on PLCs that treats student learning as the main goal in the establishment of PLCs, as mentioned previously in this chapter. In backward planning, as indicated by Guskey (2014), educators and policymakers first determine what learning outcomes (LOs) they want their students to achieve. Next, they decide on the practices and policies that the literature suggests will produce the selected LOs. Then, the aspects of organizational support that will be needed in place are considered. After that, professionals decide what skills and knowledge are needed to implement the required practices and policies to reach their target. Then, the experiences that the participants need to go through to develop the skills and knowledge identified in the previous step are considered. These experiences could be seminars, workshops, or meetings for example. The chart below summarizes the five steps of backward planning. These steps will be used when planning the intervention for the present study for many reasons. First, it is important to plan activities and programmes with the target in mind (step 1). All of the other steps lead to step 1. Second, this planning aid evaluating the activity alone and as part of the PLC. A third reason to use these steps is that planning processes can be cyclical. Whenever there are changes in what can be achieved, the changes can be planned can be adjusted easily by going back through the 5 steps. Hirsh (2012, p. 72) asserted that “without first examining students’ needs and identifying the related knowledge and skills staff need, selecting a professional learning focus can be arbitrary rather than deliberate.”

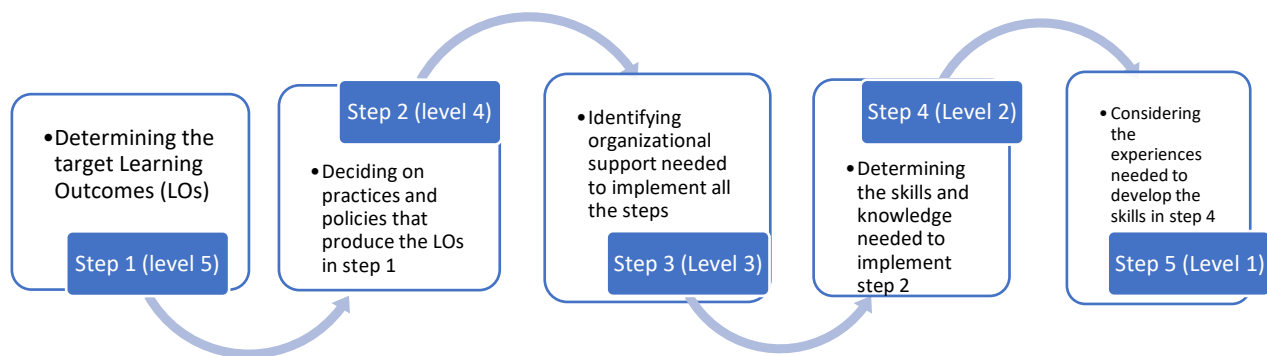


Figure 2: Backward Planning of Guskey (2014)

3.6.4 Managing, Leading and Promoting PLC Development

Bolam et al. (2005) and Stoll et al. (2006) indicate that establishing and sustaining PLCs are a crucial management and leadership tasks. The support that the staff receive from managers and senior staff is influential in the creation of a positive culture and environment for professional and collective learning. Staff feel that they are valued and appreciated if their perspectives are integrated into the vision and values that leaders promote in their institutions. Shared leadership and responsibility increase staff commitment to the enhancement of student learning. This sharing is also addressed in the PLC characteristics elucidated earlier in this section. Some PLC responsibilities that can be shared with all staff are leading activities, projects and meetings.

These four processes and eight characteristics of PLCs (Bolam et al., 2005; Stoll et al., 2006) suggest that PLCs are projects that should be sustained as long as institutions exist. Additionally, continual evaluation and collaboration support the development and sustainability of PLCs. In other words, successful require planning that considers and makes use of every physical and human resource and make use of it. However, like other processes and projects, PLCs face many challenges. These challenges are detailed in the following section.

3.7 PLCs: Challenges and Debates

Although much of the literature on PLCs acknowledges their positive results on professional and collective learning, there are existing debates on how to structure PLCs. They are highlighted in this section.

3.7.1 Social Support

An interesting and critical point raised by a few researchers who study PLCs is related to the support offered to the PLCs by the society or the community (e.g., parents) outside the institution. Huffman et al. (2016) and Louis and Marks (1998) argued that when PLCs are socially supported, they help students to reach high levels of achievement. Such findings support the significance of relating classroom practices to external factors outside the institution community. However, this point is not widely addressed in studies investigating PLCs. It should receive attention because educational institutions are part of the society that they serve, and the schools and society influence each other. Due to this mutual relationship, society is a vital component of learning theories – for example, in the sociocultural theory proposed by Vygotsky (1978, 1986) and the social learning

theory of Lave and Wenger (Lave, 1996; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). These theories are addressed in the theoretical framework section of the introduction to this dissertation. Therefore, addressing and involving the society in which teachers live and work in the creation of PLCs can support staff in realizing their vision of enhancing student learning (Huffman et al., 2016). Also, involving the society might reduce the financial challenges that PLCs face because the creation of PLCs requires high-quality physical resources and space (Stoll et al., 2006). For instance, the society (e.g., parents) can donate to provide the resources needed for PLCs.

3.7.2 The Focus of PLCs

There are debates in the literature on what the focus of PLCs should be. As Wenger (1998) stressed, this is because their focus will depend on the common understanding of the members of the community; that common understanding will influence the development of the shared practices and experiences of the members of the PLC. Several different perspectives on the proper focus of PLCs can be found in the literature.

Some scholars advocate that PLCs should explore daily practices (Kline, 2007; Wood, 2007). This is because “[t]eachers' daily practice is most important and most central in their thinking” (Elliott, 2010, p. 31). In PLCs, teachers consciously share their practices and what their students have and haven't achieved as they “look for successful practice and attempt to replicate it in their own practice” (Dufour, 2004, p. 4). For instance, in a case study investigating the impact of collaboration and interaction among teachers in PLCs in two high schools, Little (2002) used several methods, including audio and video recordings, to collect data on teachers' interactions with their colleagues to explore the influence of the interactions on instructional improvements. This type of research can produce richer and stronger findings than data gathered from interviews, surveys and field observations (see, for example, Pang et al., 2016; Phillips, 2003; Trilaksono et al., 2019). This is because audio and video records are utilized to capture the natural interactions among teachers and students, thus providing the opportunity to understand “how and to what extent professional communities afford opportunities for teacher learning and innovation in teaching practice” (Little, 2002, p. 919). Such natural interactions are missed in interviews, surveys, and short-term observations. Little found that focusing on daily work and practice leads teachers to pay explicit attention to professional learning. Although this study used audio and video recordings

over a period of time, the challenge that Little faced is that microphones and cameras do not record and capture everything. Researchers need to consider this point and find ways of investigating such details.

The findings of a study by Wood (2007) that examined how knowledge is shared in PLCs are in line with Little's (2002) observations. Wood's study showed that professional learning involves systematic analyses and observations of classroom practices and collegial interactions and dialogues. In such interactions, teachers are not only users of knowledge, they create and disseminate this knowledge. The findings also suggest that the responsibility for learning should be shouldered by teachers; to do so they must continually question their practices and reflect on their learning.

In contrast, it can be argued that PLCs should focus on student learning, whether learning that is measured by the results of tests and assessments or learning that is not tested or assessed. For example, in his article on PLCs, Dufour (2004, p. 5) stressed that the focus of PLCs should be students' achievement data because they provide "a useful indicator of progress". Strahan (2003) took a similar perspective, arguing that discussions about data were important in developing a culture of professional collaboration among staff. He evaluated PLCs by focusing on PLC activities relating to reading skills and student results on achievement tests. The students received high scores, which Strahan explained as the result of successful collaboration and participation in PLCs.

In addition, some researchers explore factors beyond student learning beyond test scores that can reflect student learning. For instance, Sawyer and Rimm-Kaufman (2007) found that collaboration among teachers increases when they discuss topics relevant to student learning. Among these topics were student-centred practices, the curriculum, classroom discipline and student learning difficulties. Such topics are important factors that enhance student learning. This study provides important insights that tests and assessment results are not the only ways of tracking the progress and learning of students.

Other researchers argue that PLCs should focus on linking theory to practice. For example, Grossman et al. (2001) discussed whether the primary focus of PLCs should be to link the intellectual development of participants to classroom practices. They pointed out that fostering intellectual development and encouraging improvement in classroom practices are not usually done simultaneously, and PLCs should focus on ensuring that both aims are achieved. Grossman et al. also spotlighted the importance of ensuring that teachers understand the relationship between theory and practice because when they comprehend this link, they may hone both the conceptual basis of their learning and the application of this learning. In the same vein, Barab et al. (2002) demonstrated that the connection between theory and practice in PLCs should be conceptualized as a significant component in the shaping and building of these communities. In other words, when PLC participants question and challenge the conceptual bases of their practices and the practices themselves, their shared understandings of theory and practice may change.

Other researchers believe that PLCs should have multiple foci. For example, Elliott (2010) argued that incorporating two or three foci in the content of PLCs is vital to their success. Dufour (2004), for instance, suggested using student data as an indicator of student progress. In addition, he stressed focusing on practice and theory because this dual focus “requires educators to change traditional practices and revise prevalent assumptions” (Dufour, 2004, p. 11). This argument suggests that in addition to focusing on student achievement data, a secondary focus on theory and practice enables teachers to modify their thinking and understanding and improve their practices accordingly. Complementing Dufour's (2004) work is a study by Garcia (2005) that investigated the relationship between PLCs and student performance. In that study, Garcia studied the implementation of the Dallas Collaborative Model, a framework that is designed to help principals increase the efficacy of their teachers via collaborative professional learning opportunities. The PLCs that were investigated had two foci: student achievement scores and teachers' daily practices. Collaboration among teachers to learn and solve problems increased after the implementation of the PLC model.

Although student data is an indicator of student learning and progress, members of PLCs need to be cautious about using this data exclusively. This is because student data is mainly ‘numbers’ and demonstrates what can be ‘measured’. When PLCs focus primarily on measurable components,

this may lead their members to emphasize improving the numbers rather than encouraging collective professional learning and improved teaching practice. In other words, if student scores are dominant in PLC activities and meetings, the communities may become test-oriented and aim to increase student scores instead of focusing on quality and deep teaching and learning. This is not to say that student data should be discarded or marginalized in PLCs. These data can be useful when making decisions, and they provide part of the picture of student learning. PLCs should “put learning first—before achievement and testing— and get better achievement as a consequence” (Hargreaves, 2007, p. 192).

3.7.3 Ownership and Active Engagement

As mentioned previously, shared leadership is one of the characteristics of PLCs. Shared leadership can be fostered by ownership and active engagement in PLCs (Elliott, 2010). Demonstrating the importance of leadership in PLCs, Kline (2007) noted that leadership is a prerequisite for creating PLCs and also the result of such communities. She also agreed with the many researchers who have argued that leadership should be shared among the members of PLCs (see, for example, Bolam et al., 2005; Chen et al., 2016; Hipp & Huffman, 2003). This sharing leads to the existence of multiple forms of leadership in each PLC because all members have the opportunity to take responsibility and ownership of their learning and engage actively in this learning (Elliott, 2010).

Although many researchers support involving teachers in leadership, decision making and other aspects of PLCs, obtaining teachers’ engagement and ownership can be a challenge when creating PLCs. In a study examining the qualities of teachers and the impact of teacher characteristics on collective development, Brownell et al. (2006) identified five characteristics that influenced teachers’ willingness to participate in PLCs. These factors were mainly related to teachers’ knowledge of pedagogy and curriculum and their perceptions of the teaching and learning process. Moreover, readiness to participate in collective learning was found to be affected by having background information about the students’ beliefs, their behaviours and their learning abilities and preferences. This implies that teachers are willing to participate in PLCs if the participants have similar perceptions and possess similar types of knowledge. Kwakman (2003) added to these findings by observing that teachers’ personal characteristics may form a barrier to participation in

PLCs. To overcome this challenge, there is a need to create commonalities that encourage teachers to share their knowledge and experiences with others without feeling that they are lagging or do not have as deep knowledge as the other members. It has been suggested that commonalities can be created via training teachers to look at data, reflect on it, share their classroom practices and work and support each other for the sake of collective learning (see, for example, Garcia, 2005; Sawyer & Rimm-Kaufman, 2007). This is because such commonalities impact the relationships the members have with one another, and those relationships influence the working environment and, hence, the professional learning that occurs. The potential impact of this training on PLCs in general and staff relationships specifically is an area that has received little attention in the literature, though research on the characteristics of successful PLCs has spotlighted the need for respect, trust, building networks, and fostering collective learning.

Another debate related to engagement in PLCs is linked to privacy. Elliott (2010) demonstrated that active engagement by members in the formation of networks for PLC learning opportunities may reduce privacy among the members. This is not an issue in traditional PD sessions as the participants do not need to work as collaboratively and collectively as they do in PLCs. However, many researchers favour active engagement in PLCs and the creation of networks among members due to the positive impacts of these actions on the professional learning process. For instance, in their report on PD in the USA and abroad, Darling-Hammond et al. (2009) explained that when staff engage in reflective and critical conversations in supportive communities, they analyse, question, reflect and criticize their practices and student learning. Darling-Hammond et al. also stressed that engagement in supportive networks provides teachers with the opportunities they need to connect theory and practice in their contexts and with their students. The benefits teachers get from engaging actively in PLCs outweigh the privacy concerns that some researchers have raised.

Although some researchers have raised questions about PLCs, the utility of such communities has made institutions willing to create them. The debates about PLCs and the challenges involved in creating them should not be considered negative and demotivating. Instead, they can be used by staff and policymakers as starting points for planning PLCs and being proactive in developing solutions for the challenges that can be expected to emerge. For this reason, Schaap et al. (2019,

p. 815) have suggested considering “cultural (e.g. ideas, values, beliefs), structural (e.g. relationships, roles, power, trust), or material (e.g. resources, physical environment) conditions and the degree to which they are available or flexible”.

3.8 Summary and Conclusion

In this chapter, PD was discussed to illustrate the weaknesses that have motivated educators and policymakers to create PLCs as a form of PD that can bolster teacher and student learning. This brief discussion was followed by a consideration of the meaning of PLCs and an exploration of the emergence of PLCs. Then, the characteristics and processes of PLCs were highlighted. In the last section of the chapter, some debates and challenges were examined. As shown, poorly designed PD, in which teachers are passive learners and their real needs are marginalized, has resulted in the promotion of PLCs. The literature on PLCs is extensive. It focuses primarily on the promotion of supporting learning environments and, above all, emphasizes improvements in student learning. The positive impacts of PLCs that are discussed in this chapter should encourage active participation in PLCs. Such participation improves teaching quality and student learning and achievement.

The establishment of PLCs is surrounded by different issues and debates. Some of them are centralized around the role of the society and social support. Some debates address the point of what should the focus of the PLC be. Other researchers challenge engagement and leadership in the PLC.

These debates and challenges raise questions of whether such challenges arise if the members engage in a PLC for the first time. Also, how would their experience in a context in which the PLC is not formally created be and there are other different forms of professional development. Thus, I decided to examine and understand such experiences in this context. So, the study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are teachers’ experiences and perceptions after participating in an online PLC in the English Language Centre?
 - a. What benefits do teachers gain from participating in an online PLC?
 - b. What challenges do teachers face when participating in an online PLC?

2. Based on the strengths and challenges of participating in the PLC, how can it be improved and utilised to enhance both teacher and student learning?

The concept of PLCs is not new in higher education context, and PLCs share many commonalities in schools and higher education. In other words, much of the pertinent literature on PLCs focuses on student learning and staff-students learning, regardless of their context whether they are in schools or higher education. Therefore, the present study investigates the establishment of a PLC in a higher education context via the lens of Bolam et al.'s (2005) characteristics of PLCs. Although different models and characteristics have been highlighted, the present study will use the characteristics of Bolam et al. (2005) as its conceptual framework because they are more comprehensive and address the characteristics and elements addressed in school and HE context. Such characteristics will be used when designing the data collection tools via focusing on them in the semistructured meeting observations and designing some of the semi-structured interview questions. More details are presented in Chapter 4.

The following quote is an appropriate way to conclude this chapter because it inspired me to carry out this research and establish a PLC in a setting without prior experience with this kind of professional learning and development.

... building PLCs is by no means easy. A number of subtle as well as more overt processes require work... PLCs appear to be worth the considerable effort put in to creating and developing them, although there is still much more to learn about sustainability (Stoll et al., 2006, p. 247)

The positive impressions and reflections presented in this chapter indicate that it is worthwhile to create PLCs.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the methodology of this research and the means by which it forms a coherent whole. Starting with the paradigm and philosophy that underpin the study, the introduction of the research design and then the study's framework and outline follow. A discussion of reflexivity, sampling and the methods of data collection leads to an illustration of the data analysis. The last section identifies the study's ethical considerations.

4.2 The Paradigmatic Stance of the Study

A research paradigm is a way of looking at the world, pursuing knowledge and deciding what problems to investigate and what methods and techniques to use to investigate them (Cohen et al., 2018; Usher, 1996). Paradigms reflect the researchers' philosophical assumptions about the world, and these assumptions indicate the ontological and epistemological perspectives of the research as well as its methodological approaches (Grogan & Simmons, 2007). Morrison (2012) illustrates these three dimensions of research by explaining that ontology is the sense of reality and how we perceive it; epistemology deals with theories of knowledge and how we acquire knowledge; methodology is the critical thinking about reality, how to understand it and discover knowledge in a systematic way. The following sections discuss these dimensions of the study.

This study aims to investigate staff views and perceptions of an online professional learning community (PLC). Thus, it aligns with interpretivist epistemology as a theory of knowledge, a way of looking at and understanding the social world and participants' interactions. Interpretivism "assumes that all human action is meaningful and hence has to be interpreted and understood within the context of social practices" (Usher, 1996, p. 18). This assumption implies multiple world realities that differ from one individual to another. People construct these realities on the basis of human interactions, their experiences and knowledge and meanings of the world in a particular social context (Cohen et al., 2018; Crotty, 1998; Ormston et al., 2014). Thus, interpretivism posits the construction of knowledge and influences on it that result from how people behave, interact and interpret their behaviours by attributing meanings to them (Bryman, 2016). The present study is influenced by interpretivism as its epistemological position because it aims to examine the members' knowledge and realities when participating in a PLC and how they

interpret their actions and experiences. Also, the research questions (see Chapter 1 and Section 4.3 in this chapter) align with the assumption of interpretive epistemology that knowledge concerns meaning and interpretation, seeking to understand the participants' social practices and actions in context (Usher, 1996).

Leavy (2017) suggests that to work within the interpretivist paradigm, the researcher's attention should focus on the process of people assigning meanings and interpreting the situations and events they experience. Hence, my ontological approach is social constructivism, whose ideas came from the works of such researchers as Berger and Luckmann (1967) and Lincoln and Guba (1985). This approach emphasises that reality is relative because human beings do not perceive the world and construct their knowledge and understanding in isolation; they do so via social interactions that can differ from one person to another and from one group to another (Creswell, 2013, 2014; Grogan & Simmons, 2007; Morrison, 2012; Ormston et al., 2014; Pella, 2011; Punch & Oancea, 2014; Schwandt, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). As Efron and Ravid (2013) articulate, in educational institutions, staff interactions socially construct knowledge and reality. The social constructivist perspective of this study adheres to the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky (1978, 1986), the theoretical framework underpinning the study (see Section 1.5). The aim of this study—to understand how people view and perceive their experiences when they become members of an online PLC—requires in-depth analysis and interpretation of their interactions in their institutional context because social interactions “are strongly influenced by the uniqueness of each context and perceived differently by each individual” (Efron & Ravid, 2013, p. 40). Hence, obtaining an interpretive perspective on the participants' experiences and perceptions of the PLC, the philosophical assumptions of interpretivism and social constructivism inform the design of this research (Creswell, 2014; Yin, 2018). The following section explains this design.

4.3 Research Design

As highlighted in Chapter 3, PLCs have proved to have a positive impact on student learning (Bolam et al., 2005; Hassan et al., 2018; Rodick, 2013; Trilaksono et al., 2019; Vescio et al., 2008). Therefore, it is important to understand how the members of a PLC experience it and learn within this community. One way to investigate how PLCs could work in the context of Omani higher education is to examine staff views and perceptions by conducting an exploratory case study

(Efron & Ravid, 2013). Case study research is an empirical research approach that aims to investigate a case in-depth, in its real-life or natural context, and discover the details of how it operates (Cohen et al., 2018; Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 2013, 2018). The case study approach enables the researcher to “reveal the unique features of the case” (Bryman, 2016, p. 61) and answer the following research questions:

1. What are teachers’ experiences and perceptions after participating in an online PLC in the English Language Centre (ELC)?
 - a. What benefits do teachers gain from participating in an online PLC?
 - b. What challenges do teachers face when participating in an online PLC?
2. Based on the strengths and challenges of participating in the PLC, how can it be improved and utilised to enhance both teacher and student learning?

The case this research investigated was an English Language Centre (ELC) in one of the higher education institutions (HEIs) in Oman. As Chapter 1 mentions, the notion of PLCs can be considered to be in its infancy as a concept and practice, meaning that there are professional gatherings and group learning opportunities taking place at HEIs that may be established and done for various purposes. In other words, HEIs have different plans and practices for professional development (PD), but there are no systematic plans and clear policies for professional learning (Al-Lamki, 2009; Al Afi, 2014) that need to exist to direct teachers’ efforts and time towards their professional growth (Al Hosni, 2019) and hence, their students’ improvement and learning. The idea of investigating an ELC in particular came from the vital role those centres play as the point from which students begin their journeys in undergraduate studies (Al Riyami, 2016). Due to this important role (see more information in Chapter 1), I decided to create a PLC and selected one ELC, particularly due to its geographical proximity, access and time constraints. Examining more than one ELC would require a great deal of time and effort because of the large distances between HEIs. Because PLCs do not operate in the Omani HEIs, I did action research and established one in the target ELC. The following section elucidates this procedure.

4.3.1 Action Research

I adopted an action research approach to this case study. McNiff (2013, p. 25) defines action as “a process of people interacting together and learning with and from one another in order to understand their practices and situations, and to take purposeful action to improve them”. This definition indicates that people make purposeful decisions and take actions on the basis of their interactions with each other, for the purpose of understanding their practices as a means of improving them. Also, McNiff’s definition closely corresponds to the purpose of PLCs and how they work. As the literature review chapter states, members of the PLC interact and work collectively, to improve student learning by learning from one another and reflecting on their own practices. Thus, action research was the choice for answering the study’s research questions because it contributes to the development of teachers’ professional knowledge by helping them understand their own practices (Punch & Oancea, 2014), and, thus, discovering their strengths and working on their weaknesses.

Action research qualifies as a reflective process (Herr & Anderson, 2015) in which staff understand themselves and their practices and, hence, grow professionally (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Punch & Oancea, 2014). Depending on the purposes, focus and aims, there are three types of action research: technical, practical and critical (Kemmis et al., 2014). Table 4 summarises the differences between them.

Table 4: Summary of the Kemmis et al.'s (2014) Classification of Action Research

Type of Action Research	Characteristics
Technical	Aims to improve and control predefined outcomes. Practice functions as a means to produce a known end (e.g. getting better scores on a test). Here, the means can be changing how students work in the class or the practice of the teacher. The focus is on the practitioners, while participants are their objects. The relationship between the researcher and the participant is one-way. The researcher is the one who decides what to do and change.

Practical	Aims to educate and improve practitioners' work. Others are subjects, and they have a voice. The focus is on improving the means in order to improve the ends. The practitioner decides what to explore and change and is open to other opinions and other people's experiences. The relationship between the researcher and the participant is reciprocal.
Critical	Aims to emancipate people from injustice and unsustainability. The researcher and participants have a collective responsibility for doing research. It reflects an educational and a political agenda. The practitioners explore social realities to find out whether they have undesirable results, such as not recognising aspects of students' lives or diminishing life opportunities for students, due to teaching that is influenced by self-interests. The aim is to collectively change the social world.

This study adopted practical action research for many reasons. First, the focus of the study is the establishment of a PLC to boost student learning. In other words, it aims at improving the practices and experiences of teachers in order to create better student outcomes. Second, members were functionally subjects who have a voice and could express their views on deciding what to learn and improve. Therefore, the members decided on what areas they wanted to focus on (see Appendix 9). Also, the relationship between the members and me was mutual. The members had the freedom to share their experiences and reflections. At the same time, I observed the meetings and also shared some reflections with them based on my experience as a teacher in the target institution. Third, the practical stance of action research clearly supports my social constructivist approach, by encouraging the members and I to be open to others' views and experiences because such social interactions provide an opportunity for reflection and learning to achieve better outcomes, which McNiff's (2013) definition asserts (see above).

I hoped that by taking the practical stance on action research, I could work with the members and encourage members to work on the means—that is, to reflect, to share, to experience, to understand, to research, and to improve practices as a means of improving ends (not coincidentally, the primary goal of the education system, namely, developing students towards higher levels of

knowledge and skills). This goal rests on the view that action research can be “an organizing strategy to get people involved and active around particular issues” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 240). It is worth noting that because the target institution is my workplace, my positionality in this research was that of an insider, that made it easier to select the members and plan the PLC with them. Also, it enabled me to start the intervention and conduct the action research, taking into consideration the influence of my values on the study. This is highlighted in Section 4.5.

Conducting action research is not an easy linear process. Rather, it is a complex process that involves many stages. Thus, the construction of many frameworks has supported the conceptualisation of conducting action research (see, for example, Burns, 2010; Kemmis et al., 2014; McNiff, 2013; McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). The following section explains in detail the framework that this study adopted.

4.3.2 Action Research Framework

This study adapted the action research framework of Cohen et al. (2018), which Figure 4.1 illustrates. I selected that framework for several reasons. The first and most important reason is that this framework emphasises the significance of reflection by placing it at the centre of the framework. As Chapter 3 stresses, reflection is a crucial practice in the PLCs (Hord & Sommers, 2008; Sari et al., 2018), as well as a key element embedded in the research questions that require members to reflect on their PLC experiences, to understand how a PLC’s members could engage in its practice. This reflection reinforces the epistemological assumption that actions generate and build meaning and knowledge. Another reason for selecting this framework is that it would remind me of the importance and dynamic nature of reflection at all stages of this research, while asking the members to reflect on their PLC actions and experiences, by questioning and justifying the approaches to the stages of action research during the study.

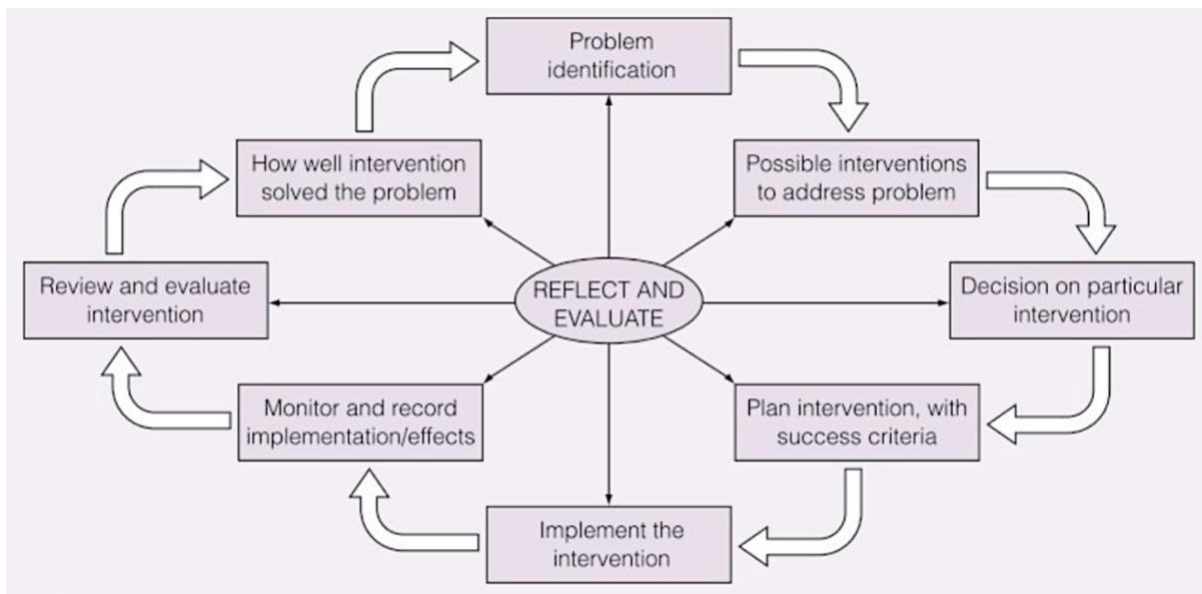


Figure 3: The framework of Action research adapted from Cohen et al., (2018, p. 451)

In addition, the design of the study is influenced by Guskey’s (2014) model of evaluation (see section 3.6.3) whose steps aligns with the action research framework of Cohen et al. (2018). The framework of Cohen et al. (2018) involves eight stages (see Figure 3). Stage 1 identifies the problem. In stage 2, interested parties discuss the problem, and research questions and objectives are set and identified. Describing this stage, Cohen et al. (2018, p. 450) argue that in this step, “the seeds of success or failure are planted”. I agree with their argument because if the objects and the problem are not perfectly clear to all parties in the action research, the whole study might easily miscarry. In the third stage, the literature reviewed illustrates learning from other studies the possible approaches to the problem. In stage 4, the researcher modifies the problem and plans the whole intervention. Then, stage 5 becomes the occasion for selecting the samples and making decisions on the resources and materials the intervention requires. The sixth and seventh stages involve implementing, monitoring, and evaluating the intervention, keeping in mind that evaluation is a continuous process. Also, data collection occurs at this stage. Burns (2010) calls the stage during which monitoring occurs in action research ‘observation’ because, at this stage, the researcher observes the impact of the intervention on participants’ actions and thoughts. In the last stage, participants engage in interpreting the data and discussing the findings. As mentioned

above, reflection is part of every stage of this framework, and its central position asserts a critical point, namely, that action research is a cyclical process that never ends.

The steps abovementioned align with the Guskeys' backward planning (2014). It starts with identifying the needs of the students and the problems to focus on. This is followed by discussing the practices that can help students learn and meet their needs. Also, the organizational support needed for professional learning is identified and the participants engage in different learning settings, that are discussions in the present study. This is highlighted in the following section. These steps, as highlighted in Chapter 3, are cyclical and allow for evaluation at different points of the study. Figure 3 illustrates this conceptualisation via the arrows that have no starting and no ending points. The following section explains how I applied Guskey's (2014) framework and Cohen et al.'s (2018) framework steps to the study at hand.

4.4 Stages of the Study

The study involved eight stages, following the Cohen et al. (2018) framework.

Stage 1

The starting point is that the problems and issues on which the action research focuses related to one's own practices and how to improve them (McAteer, 2013). So, I identified PLCs as an area worth researching, due to the scarcity of such research in the Omani HEI context.

Stage 2

In this stage, I had preliminary discussions with other researchers and lecturers to specify the research questions and the aims of the research.

Stage 3

This stage involved reviewing pertinent literature to discover how comparable studies have researched PLCs, their establishment, and the methods for investigating them. Chapter 3 discusses this review.

Stage 4

In this stage, I planned the intervention and the aims were made clear to the members who had active roles in the planning stage and a significant part in deciding on the areas of focus for the study. More details of the intervention are in Section 4.5, which presents additional details on the intervention.

Stage 5

In Stage 4, the achievement of this stage began with the selection of the sample. After recruiting the members who agreed to be part of this study, the members and I finalised the areas on which the online PLC would focus. This was part of planning the intervention. Stage five included discussing the necessary resources for administering and performing the action research.

Stage 6

In this stage, the intervention was implemented and I monitored the implementation and evaluation procedures.

Stage 7

This was the stage during which data collection from different sources within the online PLC to document how members experienced it.

Stage 8

This last stage in the framework by Cohen et al. (2018) can also serve to begin another cycle of the action research. It involved overall interpretation and evaluation of the intervention.

These stages indicate the course that this action research intended to follow. However, the actual implementation did not follow the order above, for many reasons. First, as highlighted earlier, reflection and evaluation were continuous. Thus, I took up some steps before others, and I modified some decisions based on how the intervention unfolded. For instance, I selected the sample not in stage five, as the framework described; rather, I selected it before finalising the intervention plan, to give the members a voice in this study; after all, as they were the subjects, their opinions and

decisions were critical. Giving the members a voice to decide the topics for the PLC sessions and room in which to express their opinions and experiences is what Kemmis et al. (2014) advocate in practical action research (see Table 4.1). Also, some stages were implemented at the same time (e.g. stages six and seven), which stresses the intertwined and recursive nature of the stages and the process (Efron & Ravid, 2013).

4.4.1 The Structure of the Intervention

The intervention is the key part of this action research, and Table 5 illustrates its implementation. Notably, the study was conducted online, and Section 4.6 provides more details on the online mode of the study.

Table 5: Structure of the Intervention

Task	What the researcher did	What the members did
Preliminary Documentary analysis	I sent an email to the head of the ELC to get access to the PD reports the Staff Development Committee (SDC) had produced. She provided me with the contact details of the quality assurance officer and the head of SDC, who provided me with the reports produced in academic years (AYs) 17/18, 18/19 and 19/20. I used those reports to find out the activities run in those years, and the kind of activities that staff did and reports the staff wrote on those activities, to compare PD reports with the findings of the PLC.	
Establishment of the online PLC	I conducted an introductory meeting with all staff who showed an interest in participating, to introduce the PLC and the study (see Appendix 6). After that, I sent a form to the members who signed the consent to fill in with some information (e.g., nationality and years of experience) and the areas on which they wanted to focus in the PLC (see Appendix 9). Also, I sent a sheet containing important	The members read the article and prepared the points they wanted to discuss in the first meeting.

	<p>information about the study to the members (see Appendix 7). I finalised the areas based on the needs of the majority of the members. All members could find at least one area matching the interests they listed on the form (see Appendix 9) they submitted before the start of the PLC. The areas selected were limited to four areas due to time constraints which hindered addressing all the areas the members highlighted in the form. Then, I sent a timetable (see Appendix 10) and a plan (see Appendix 11) with the important notes the members needed to know regarding what was expected of them and the areas that we would discuss. The first article to read was shared through MS Teams so that the members would read it before the meeting. Then, I conducted the first online meeting.</p>	
<p>First online PLC meeting and session</p>	<p>I started leading at the beginning of the first meeting, to show the members how they should discuss the article they read and where their focus should be; I handed it over to them to continue their discussions and reflection. I observed the meeting and took notes. I sent another article after the meeting on another area the members had selected, and I invited members to share any materials they found useful in the same area and post any concerns or comments on MS Teams.</p>	<p>The members shared their experiences and discussed anticipated challenges they could face in their classes, their successful practices and how to overcome the challenges. Some members responded to the researchers' posts on MS Teams with some comments. Some members read the article to prepare for the next meeting.</p>
<p>Second online PLC meeting and session and other following meetings</p>	<p>I observed the meeting and took notes. I sent another article after the meeting on another area the members had selected, and I stressed the significance of sharing any materials they found useful on the same area and posting any concerns or comments at any time on MS</p>	<p>The members led the meeting and discussed the points they prepared from the article I sent and classroom practices. The members shared their experiences and discussed anticipated challenges they could face in their classroom practices and</p>

	Teams. I encouraged the members to make use of the MS Teams platform to discuss, comment, reflect and share experiences, thoughts and materials.	how to overcome them. Some members responded to the researchers' posts on MS Teams and posted some comments. Some members read the article to prepare for the next meeting.
The last online PLC meeting	I observed the meeting and took notes. I asked the members to share their final thoughts and reflections on the online PLC, and I thanked them for their participation. I reminded them that there would be further communications with them to member-check the data they had provided.	The members led the meeting and discussed the points they prepared from the article I sent and their classroom practices. The members shared and reflected on their experiences in the PLC.

During the intervention, I conducted online semistructured interviews at different points (see Section 4.8.3 and Figure 4 below). A two-to-three-week gap was allowed between the meetings so that the members would have enough time to focus on the areas discussed and prepare for the coming meetings. The present study used research articles to support the PLC and provide the members with some refreshing background information on the areas about which they wanted to learn. They read those articles before the meetings and referred to them in their discussions. Also, they linked those articles to their daily classroom practices. Such utilisation of research articles proved effective in PLCs established in adult ESL programs in Canada (Abbott et al., 2018). Similar to the present intervention, research learning communities (RLCs) shared the same ground, using research in professional learning. Brown (2017) and Rose et al. (2017) addressed using research in the workshops that the RLCs they investigated ran, for the sake of improving staff practices. They assigned a team leader to such research groups, creating the expectation for teachers “to share research knowledge and to roll out research-informed teaching strategies” (Brown, 2017, p. 388).

The implementation of the intervention took one semester (twelve weeks). Figure 4 provides an illustration of the Intervention and the methods used to collect data. More details about these methods are presented in Section 4.8

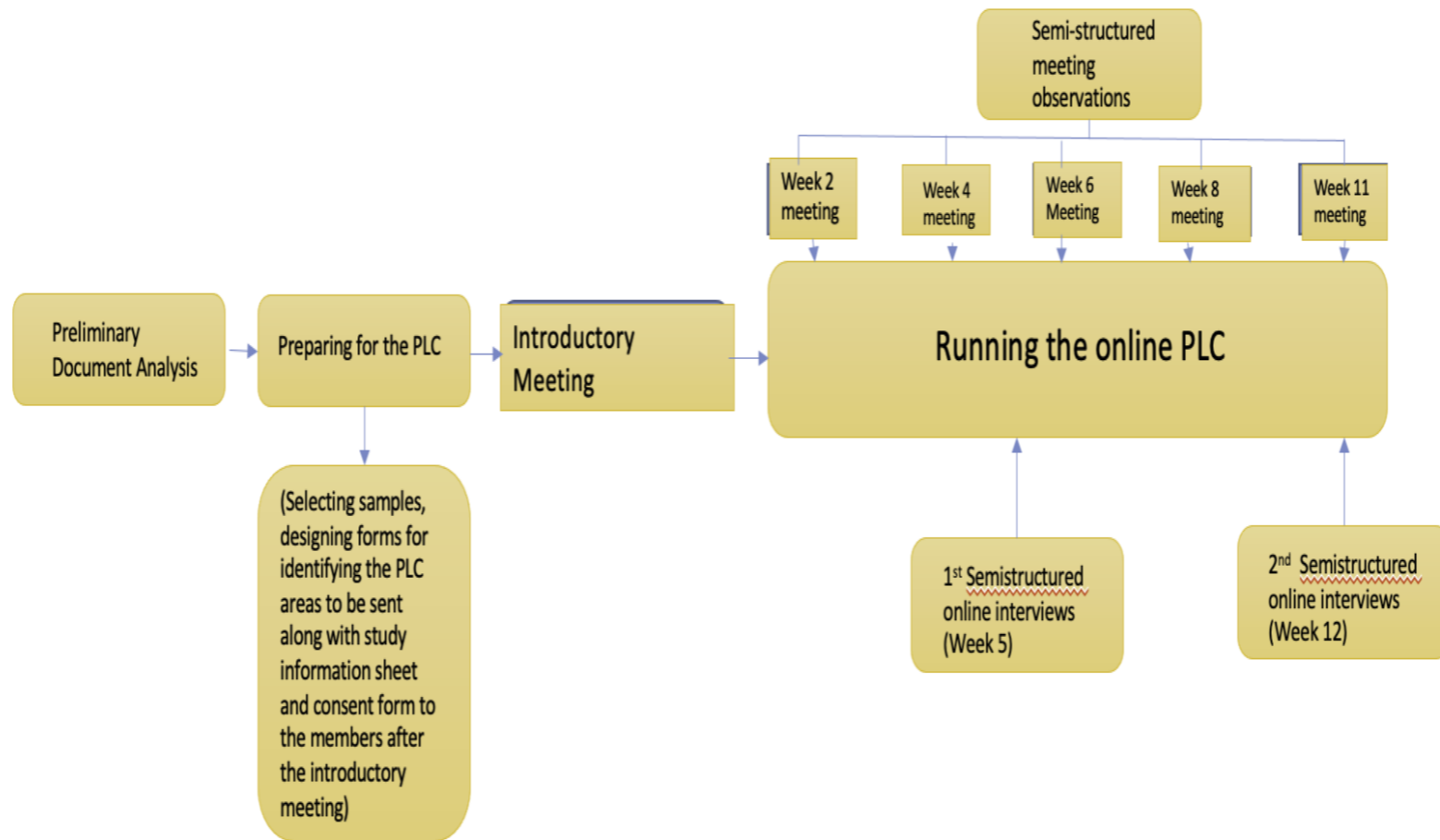


Figure 4 : Summary of the Intervention and the Data Collection Methods

4.5 The Online Mode of the Study

The study was conducted online using MS Teams as its main platform, during the COVID-19 pandemic. There were also some email communications between the members and me. The online mode of the study enabled the members and me to do many things despite some technical challenges. First, online meetings enabled the members to join easily from wherever they were. Some were in their offices, some were at home, and some were in other departments while attending meetings. Additionally, the members could open many files and share screens during meetings, without the need to print out shared articles. During meetings, the members referred to specific articles and pages while talking, and other members could easily follow up with them because the articles were stored in the same channel as the meeting.

Second, the members were added to a closed team, to maintain privacy. Also, they received the right to post and comment on others' posts without any restrictions, to maximise interaction among the members of the team. Third, in MS Teams, topics were arranged into channels, and each channel had its own posts, files and data. This feature made it easy for the members and me to find specific files or data. Also, there was a channel named 'General' for general posts and announcements.

Furthermore, meetings were scheduled directly in MS Teams, and an invitation was sent to the members to remind them of the meeting. Because the members and I used the university domain to establish the PLC, I could manage many of the team features. Also, whenever the members logged into MS Teams for their classes, they could open the PLC team page to check the latest posts. The features of MS Teams contributed to the smooth interaction among the members who were familiar with the software before the start of this study, as they used it to conduct their classes online for many semesters. For this reason, I observed that the members had no issues with using MS Teams.

4.6 Reflexivity

As mentioned above, this qualitative study was conducted in an ELC at an HEI in Oman. This has been my workplace for six years before starting my doctoral degree, and I will go back to the same institution after I finish my studies because I have a permanent contract as a lecturer there. Doing

research in my workplace required me to think of my positionality and values as a researcher. Creswell (2014) points out that researchers within the social constructivist paradigm realise the influence of their values and backgrounds on their interpretations. Thus, reflexivity is significant in qualitative research because “it is impossible to study something without having some effect on it” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 39). This effect increases in action research (Cohen et al., 2018) where researchers work very closely with the participants and may be part of the action or intervention, as was the case in this study. I was part of planning the intervention.

I was an insider researcher because I did this study in this setting (Suter, 2012). This positionality had many advantages. First, I could easily get access to the research site. Second, my familiarity with this site made it easy to identify the sample because I know most of the staff in this centre (see Section 4.7). Although familiarity assists researchers in understanding how participants interpret their views and experiences, Berger (2015) suggests keeping logs during the study. Therefore, I kept a log throughout the study to record my feelings and thoughts. I also revisited my analysis several times, to minimise the effect of my experiences and biases on the members. Another way I used to reduce this effect was by sending the transcribed interviews to the members to check, edit (Leavy, 2017) and remove any parts that they thought were too sensitive to report.

However, I had to consider some power issues before starting to implement the study. During my work in this centre, I performed some administrative tasks, such as those that are the responsibility of a level coordinator in the foundation programme, which led many staff to regard me as a part of the administration. As a result, they may have had an incentive to say things that they thought would please me. To minimise power issues, I followed the hierarchy followed in Oman for getting access to research sites. I also made it perfectly clear that I was there for research purposes that had nothing to do with the administrative duties I had before. I also assured the members that the information they would provide would not affect their ranking or work in the institution. Additionally, I used several methods of collecting data to see the situation from different perspectives (see Section 4.8).

4.7 Sampling

The study used purposive sampling, defined as ‘sampling in a deliberate way, with some purpose or focus in mind’ (Punch & Oancea, 2014, p. 210). As is typical with a qualitative study, there is no claim to generalisability, so purposeful sampling is appropriate. Thus, I used the following criteria to select members:

- Members work in the ELC;
- Members teach foundation-year students and post-foundation students;
- Members are from different nationalities and backgrounds;
- Members have varying years of experience.

I have identified these criteria to ensure having sources likely to provide rich and relevant data. This is because I wanted variation and differences among members. Having different years of experience, different backgrounds and values could contribute to collective learning and sharing of different experiences, values, ideas and reflections. Also, most of the members were teaching foundation-level students, which could contribute to the richness and variation in experiences because the foundation programme contains a large proportion of students in this HEI, and students have different learning needs. Foundation students form over 30% of the total enrolment, according to the statistics published on the institution’s website in 2019. One of the members was teaching in the post-foundation programme, and those experiences enabled the members to see the strengths of teachers and the struggles they could face when teaching higher-level students. For two members, it was the first year of teaching in the target institution, though they taught in other institutions before. So, selecting members using these criteria would enrich the PLC experience of the members and help me identify the strengths and weaknesses of establishing PLCs in the target context, which would ultimately answer the research questions (Patton, 2002). Having worked in this setting previously enabled me to identify the members who might have an interest in learning professionally and working in groups, and matched the criteria listed above. Thus, I contacted those teachers to find out if they had the interest to be part of this study. Most of them did not respond. Twelve teachers replied back expressing their willingness to be part of the PLC. This was followed by an introductory meeting that explained the study in detail and asserted giving freedom to the teachers to decide whether to take part and their right to withdraw at any time during the study (see Table 6).

Initially, I recruited twelve members, that formed about 14% of the total number of academic staff in the ELC, but four members withdrew from the study. The remaining eight members were from India, Malaysia, the UK, and the Philippines. I took a small sample for this study because, in action research, the recommendation is to have a small size to maintain control over the intervention (McNiff, 2013). At the start of the intervention, I recruited more than the number I needed for the study, due to the withdrawal factor that could intercede at any stage of the study. Since the members were from the ELC and English language teachers, English was the language of communication in the study.

Table 6: Information about the Members

pseudonym	Level Teaching	Years of Experience
Paul	Level 2- Foundation program	14
Sally	Post-foundation	10
Mary	Level 3- Foundation program	30
Noora	Level 2- Foundation program	15
Steven	Level 4- Foundation program	17
Sheila	Level 1- Foundation program	20
Emma	Level 2- Foundation program	15+
Robert	Level 2- Foundation Program	20+

4.8 Methods of Data Collection

To achieve the aims of the study, I used multiple qualitative methods to gain a deeper understanding of the topic under investigation. Also, using more than one method helps to triangulate data (Patton, 2002), a critical criterion by which to judge the quality of qualitative research (Mertens, 2010; Tracy, 2010). Triangulation is “examining evidence from different sources and using it to build a coherent justification for themes” (Creswell, 2014, p. 201). This study used three methods to collect data, validate it and member-check the findings (Patton, 2002). The means of collecting data that could answer research questions include preliminary

documentary analysis, semistructured individual interviews and meeting observations. In addition, many studies investigating PLCs, whether at the school or the HE level, use interviews and/or observations to gather qualitative data, to understand how PLCs work and members' perceptions of them (Lai et al., 2016; Mooney, 2018; Rodick, 2013; Rose et al., 2017; Schaap et al., 2019). The Bolam et al. (2005) PLC framework, for understanding how the PLC functioned and was experienced in the target setting, informed the design of the observations and interviews. More details appear below.

4.8.1 Preliminary Documentary Analysis

Documents reflect how staff communicate in an institution and indicate the official perspective of that institution (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). However, Bogdan and Biklen (2007) warn that documents can present a misleading picture of the institution that does not correspond to reality. Thus, I used this method as a starting point to establish the online PLC. I requested soft copies of the PD documents and reports from the Staff Development Committee in the target ELC for the year before the implementation of the study—that is, academic year 2019/2020, and the two years before this year to find out the latest needs of staff, areas in which they required development. I went through the documents and reports and analysed their content to figure out staff interests as those documents highlighted them (Drisko & Maschi, 2015). Also, those reports gave an idea of the organisation and evaluation of PD events. Also, I used them to compare the needs listed in PD documents with the needs pointed out by the members of the PLC. This analysis made a significant point—that is, regarding the extent to which the PD reports and documents matched what teachers actually needed, and the extent to which they agreed with the current PD practices in their context.

4.8.2 Semistructured Meeting Observations

As pointed out in the structure of the intervention, I observed the online PLC meetings. I used meeting observations because they “give direct access to social interactions” (Simpson & Tuson, 1995, p. 16). Observations range on a scale from participatory to non-participatory observations, depending on the degree of participation of the researcher in the activities of the participants (Leavy, 2017). Although I led a small part of the first PLC meeting, I could classify the meeting observation as ‘non-participatory observation’ because the part I led in that meeting was very short and for the purpose of guiding members and giving them a sense of confidence that they could lead the whole meeting.

Although case studies widely use unstructured observations and interviews (see more information on interviews in Section 4.8.3) to generate many details about cases (Bryman, 2016), I decided to use semistructured meeting observations and interviews to keep control of what to observe, whom to interview and about what. So, I designed a checklist with prespecified items to use for observing meetings (see Appendix 12). I used those areas to find out which of the eight Bolam et al. (2005) characteristics were present in the target PLC (see Chapter 3). In other words, because the PLC was implemented for the first time in the target institution, I expected that some characteristics or features would be more present than others. So, informed design by Bolam et al. (2005) of a guiding observation checklist could help identify how the PLC would work. For example, some of the areas those characteristics stressed were the notion of sharing values, experiences, responsibility, developing reflective inquiry and collaboration for the sake of learning, along with trusting and respecting others. Thus, the checklist addresses those areas to understand the extent to which they would emerge in the present study. I also added another row for ‘other comments’, to record data that did not fall into the predetermined items but were relevant and important. Table 7 lists the areas on which the checklist focused. The findings of the observations along with the findings of other research tools contributed to listing which of the eight characteristics of Bolam et al. (2005) were present in the target PLC. Table 12 in Section 5.8 summarises them.

Table 7: Pre-determined areas of the Meeting Observation Form

Sharing values, experiences and ideas	Sharing challenges
Raising critical questions and sharing reflections	Sharing suggestions
Being active in discussions	Respecting others’ opinions
Sharing responsibilities	

I video-recorded all the PLC meetings, enabling me to take additional data from them to complement my observation notes. For example, online screenshots from the meetings that appear in Chapter Five (see Figure 7) showed how some members shared their experiences in meeting discussions. The data I gathered from meeting observations were used to complement the data gathered from interviews because meeting observations provide the opportunity to “see things that

may routinely escape awareness among the people in the setting” (Patton, 2002, p. 262). Also, they were helpful in observing the social interactions of the members in the target context.

4.8.3 Semistructured Interviews

Interviews were another method this study used. They are powerful in exploring the views, perceptions, meanings and realities of people involved in the experience (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Bryman, 2016; Fontana & Frey, 2000; Hipp & Huffman, 2007; Punch & Oancea, 2014). I chose this instrument of data collection because it would give the members room to freely express their views and perceptions towards the online PLC freely. Interviews “aim to make tacit teachers’ cognitive processes visible and provide a descriptive account of their practices” (Varghese & Huang, 2017, p. 421). So, I used semistructured online interviews because they aligned with the aim of this study, specifically ‘to rely as much as possible on the participants’ views of the situation being studied’ (Creswell, 2014, p. 8) and the paradigmatic stance of the study (see Section 4.2). The eight characteristics of Bolam et al. (2005) informed some of the interview questions designed to find out the extent to which they would emerge in the target setting and the members’ opinions of them. For example, in the interviews, I asked the members about their views on collaboration, sharing experiences and responsibilities and their relationships with other members.

I conducted the interviews at different points during the study, i.e., in the middle of the semester and at the end of the semester, to gain a deeper understanding of how the members viewed the PLC at different points in their experience (see Figure 4). In other words, I had individual interviews with all the members twice. All the interviews were recorded. The interviews were semistructured to not only ensure maintaining the focus on what the research aimed to answer but also allow the flexibility to ask other questions, depending on how members responded. In addition, I adapted or specialised some interview questions based on the data I had gathered from the observations. The questions were general and open, to ensure eliciting as much information as possible from the members. They mostly focused on the teaching approaches of the members, what they learned from this experience, how they conceptualised the PLC, whether they could see an influence on student learning, and how this experience could be improved (see Appendix 13 for interview A questions and Appendix 14 for interview B questions). There were also questions that I derived from the characteristics of PLCs discussed in the literature review. In addition, during

the interviews, I encouraged the members to share any thoughts or comments relating to their participation in the PLC because such reflections broaden and deepen the data of the study (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Kvale, 2006), which were used to develop insights into how the members interpreted and perceived the PLC. Table 8 shows details about each research instrument used in the present study and how data from each instrument is analysed.

Table 8: Research Instruments

Documents from the SDC	Interviews	Meeting Observations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reports on: Staff Appraisal Based on Training Needs Analysis AY 19/20, External Staff Development Program Report AY 19/20, Internal Staff Development Program Report AY 18/19 and 19/20, Staff Satisfaction Reports AY 17/18, 18/19, and 19/20, SDC Annual Report AY 19/20, Staff Training Needs Based on Staff Appraisal AY 18/19 and 19/20) - No. reports: 10 - Content analysis to find out the areas the SDC focuses on and how PD activities are run. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Semistructured online interviews - Done twice (Week 5 and Week 12) - Individual recorded interviews - Open questions - Some of the questions were derived from the PLC characteristics of Bolam et al. (2005). Some were based on observations and the interviewee’s responses during the interviews - Thematic analysis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Semistructured online observations for all the meetings - Areas of observation were derived from the PLC characteristics of Bolam et al. (2005), with flexibility to write other observations that did not fall under those characteristics. - Five recorded meeting observations (Week 2, Week 4, Week 6, Week 8, Week 11) - Thematic analysis

4.9 Data Analysis

I used thematic analysis to analyse documents, interviews and observations. Thematic analysis is “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organises and describes your data set in (rich) detail’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Such organisation of data into themes helps to interpret participants” multiple views, meanings and realities (Creswell, 2013, 2014; Spencer et al., 2014). Thematic analysis served this study well because this analysis matches the principles of social constructivism, in which people construct their own knowledge, meanings and realities. Thematic analysis, as its name suggests, focuses on

themes. The themes in this study were the result of members' social interactions in the online PLC, from which they co-constructed meanings and views in this context.

Since the study aimed at understanding and interpreting the members' experiences in the PLC, data collected from the three tools mentioned in Section 4.8 were analyzed to achieve the study aims and enable answering the research questions. Content analysis was used to analyse the documents of the SDC to have some background on how PD was run and the areas the committee focus on to compare them with the areas identified in the PLC under investigation. Also, thematic analysis was used to analyze data gathered from meeting observations and interviews to understand members' experiences, their challenges and suggestions for future improvements of the PLC. Through this analysis, several themes were identified from the data collection methods. Some of those themes were derived from the literature review, specifically, the conceptual framework of Bolam et al. (2005) such as having a positive environment and collaboration within the PLC. Some themes were identified in the data itself such as having informal conversations and the ideas the members suggested to improve the PLC (See Chapter 5 for more details on the themes).

Identifying various themes in order to answer the research questions was a long process that had many steps. First of all, I transcribed data instead of asking a transcriptionist to do it, to have the experience of immersing myself in the data I collected. It also gave me "the experience that usually generates emergent themes" (Patton, 2002, p. 441). Before the actual start of data analysis, the members received their interview scripts back to check and approve, to make sure they had no objection to any part of the information they provided during the study (see Section 4.6). This is referred to as 'member checking', and it contributes to the credibility of the research (Mertens, 2010; Tracy, 2010). I checked the transcripts with the members to ensure that my values affected neither the validity of data nor the transcription and analysis process.

For the purpose of collating data I had gathered from interviews and observations and constructing themes, I revisited the data many times (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I applied Creswell and Poth's (2018) spiral to this study (see Figure 4), which aligns with Braun and Clarke's (2006) conceptualisation of how to do thematic analysis. After collecting the data, I organised them into categories. I read through the data several times and classified them by codes (Flick, 2014). From

the codes, I constructed themes across the different methods of data collection for triangulation purposes, as Section 4.8 mentions. Appendix 15 illustrates an example of initial coming to know the data, highlighting possible codes and themes. I continued to reflect on and review those themes until I made the final list, based on their relevance and significance for the aims and questions of the study. Appendix 16 shows the final themes used for analysis and answering the research questions because I could not present all the findings the data sets entailed. The analysis of the findings appears in Chapter 5, and I discuss it in Chapter 6.

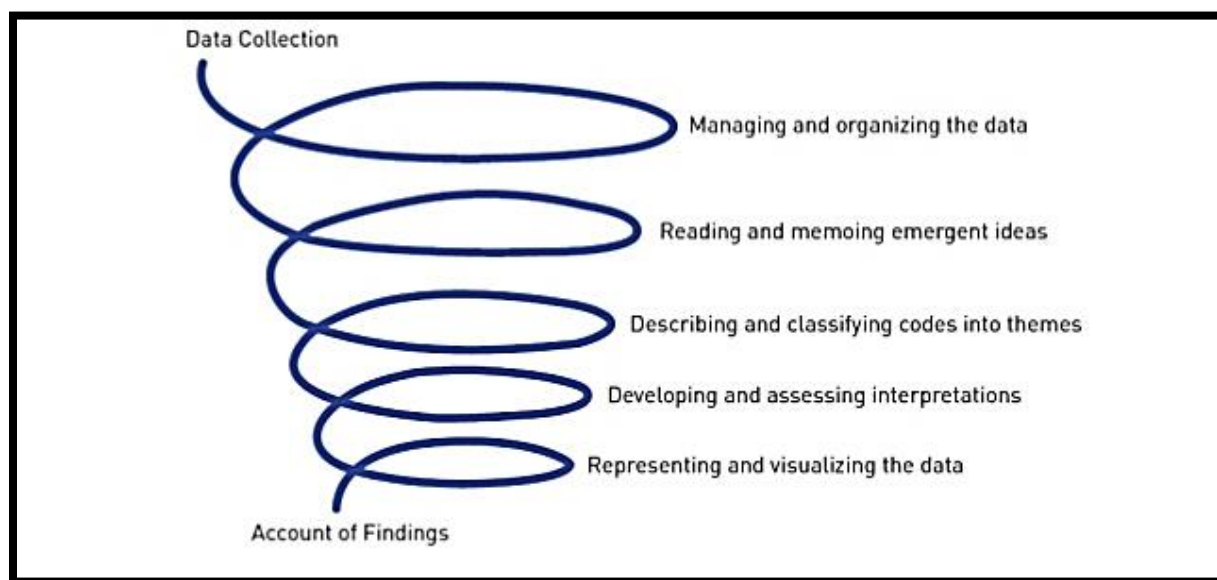


Figure 5: Creswell and Poth's (2018) Spiral of Data Analysis

4.10 Ethical Considerations

Burns (2010, p. 34) asserts that “research ethics are to do with conducting research in a moral and responsible way”. Therefore, I identified many ethical issues to ensure doing this research ethically.

4.10.1 Access and Approval

Getting permission from the research site is a significant step in conducting research (Punch, 2014). Therefore, getting this permission should follow the approval of the proposed ethics of the investigation. Since this study was conducted to fulfil the requirements for the Doctorate of Education (EdD) degree at the University of Bristol, getting the approval of the Research Ethics

Committee in the School of Education at the University of Bristol was mandatory (see Appendix 1). After receiving that approval, I contacted the Directorate General of Technical Education to get approval and access to the target institution. In my email to that office, I attached a copy of the ethics approval from the university. I also explained what the study would examine, how it would do so and what aims it targeted. They sent a letter to the dean and the head of the ELC to request them to support me in conducting the research (see Appendix 2). Also, I got approval to collect data for my research from the National Centre for Information and Statistics in Oman (see Appendix 3).

4.10.2 Consent Forms and Information Sheets

Informed consents are vital in conducting research because they give participants the opportunity to participate voluntarily or withdraw from the study (Kemmis et al., 2014; Punch, 2014; Punch & Oancea, 2014). Informed consents also give the participants ‘the opportunity to be fully informed of the nature of the research and the implications of their participation at the outset’ (Bryman, 2016, p. 131). Thus, after the introductory meeting with the staff who showed interest in the research, I sent them an information sheet that gave details about the study, the intervention, and the roles of the researcher and the members (see Appendix 7). They were also sent consent forms to sign and send back to me within two days, to show that they agreed to take part in the study (see Appendix 8). These two documents mentioned how I would collect data and ensured the members of their rights to withdraw at any stage of the study without being questioned or penalised in any way.

4.10.3 Respecting Participants

The third ethical research area was assuring participants that their participation in the study would cause them no harm. Bryman (2016) classified ‘harm’ into several broad categories, namely, psychological (e.g., stress, losing self-esteem) and physical or social (e.g., inducing participants to do reprehensible actions). Thus, I assured the members in the information sheet that data would be used for research purposes only, and hence, their participation would not harm them in any way. Also, the members were assured that their participation was voluntary, and their decisions to withdraw would be respected.

4.10.4 Anonymity and Confidentiality

Data protection is critical in the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR), as well as in the established research ethics guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018). Part of data protection is maintaining participant anonymity and confidentiality. Anonymity and confidentiality are promises “to remove any information from the data they store and analyse that may make individual respondents easily traceable and identifiable” (Punch & Oancea, 2014, p. 69). Therefore, I assured the members that all data would be held anonymously and confidentially. I assigned the members pseudonyms, to veil their identities. As highlighted earlier, they received their interview scripts to check and delete any parts they thought to be sensitive and or that might have disclosed their identity or harmed them in any way. Moreover, I assured them that I would process and access the data alone, and no one else would see their responses. Also, I would store data on the University of Bristol computer drive for the purpose, and the data would be destroyed within 3 to 5 years after completing this study.

4.11 Conclusion

This case study follows the interpretivist paradigm and takes social constructivism as an ontological approach, focusing on social interactions and the co-construction of meanings and knowledge. This study adapted the framework of action research by Cohen et al. (2018). I collected the data using preliminary documentary analysis along with online semistructured observations and interviews. To start establishing the PLC, I collected some documents from the Staff Development Committee (SDC) to analyse, to find out more about the professional development (PD) activities the target institution ran. Also, at an introductory meeting with staff who showed interest in the study, I asked them to complete forms about their interests, which I used later to determine the focus of the PLC, by identifying the areas most members selected and making sure that at least one area that each member identified was in the PLC. The areas were critical thinking skills, intrinsic motivation, learner autonomy and error correction in writing. The PLC ran for one semester, and five regular online meetings occurred every two or three weeks, to discuss the topics selected earlier and reflect on best practices in those areas, the challenges faced and suggestions for overcoming them. Notably, prior to meetings, I sent one or more articles to the members to read, reflect on and link to their daily classroom practices. There were individual online interviews with all the members in the middle of the semester and at the end, to collect and understand their PLC experiences. Also, I observed all the meetings and took notes.

The study followed the Creswell and Poth (2018) spiral of data analysis. It also explained how the study dealt with reflexivity and how I selected the members. Finally, the areas that received consideration to do the study ethically were emphasised. The next chapter presents the findings obtained from analysing the data from various sources.

Chapter 5: The Findings

5.1 Introduction

This chapter consolidates the data collected after establishing a professional learning community (PLC) at the target institution in Oman. As Chapter 4 highlighted, data collection occurred using three instruments: interviews, observations and reports from the Staff Development Committee (SDC). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, data collection occurred remotely. Microsoft Teams (MS Teams) was the primary platform the study used. These three methods supported gathering the evidence I present in this chapter. I used content analysis for documents and thematic analysis for interviews and observation data.

The characteristics of Bolam et al. (2005) informed the themes this chapter presents, and the data the research tools collected helped to answer the two research questions of the present study:

1. What are teachers' experiences and perceptions after participating in an online PLC in the English Language Centre?
 - a. What benefits do teachers gain from participating in an online PLC?
 - b. What challenges do teachers face when participating in an online PLC?
2. Based on the strengths and challenges of participating in the PLC, how can it be improved and utilised to enhance both teacher and student learning?

Notably, I present only the themes related to the research questions. Lack of time and the word limit impeded presenting all findings. Therefore, I present six key themes under Research Question 1 and one key theme under Research Question 2. The findings appear in the section for each theme, where I give an overview of the theme and use quotes and data from the three interrelated research tools. Table 9 presents the research questions along with the themes and subthemes that emerged from analysing data across the three research instruments (documents, meeting observations and individual interviews). The findings highlight different aspects of the members' experiences of their participation in the PLC. First, to understand such experiences, learning about the members' views and beliefs towards the teaching-learning process and whether they share similar values and views towards themselves as teachers is important. This appears under the first two themes in Section 5.2, showing the teaching approaches of the PLC members, and in Section 5.3,

highlighting what motivated the members to participate in the study. Then, the members' experiences appear in Section 5.4, which addresses such areas as communication and collaboration during and outside of meetings, the positive environment of the PLC and members' interests in this community. This theme leads to the next theme of the four PLC aspects the members found beneficial: knowing about other levels, improving learning skills, supporting meetings with literature and changes in practices, which appear in Section 5.5. However, some difficulties and challenges occurred in the PLC related to workload, time issues and technical issues that Section 5.6 addresses. After presenting the benefits and challenges of participating in the PLC, I evaluated it using the five levels of evaluation in Guskey's (2014) framework and data from the present study instruments. This evaluation leads to presenting ideas for improvement to create a sustainable PLC in Section 5.7. In Section 5.8, the findings relate to how to create a sustainable PLC, showing how improving and utilising the PLC can enhance both teacher and student learning.

Table 9: Research Questions and Related Themes and Sub-themes

Research Questions	Related Themes and Sub-themes
<p>1. What are teachers' experiences and perceptions after participating in an online PLC in the English Language Centre?</p> <p>a. What benefits do teachers gain from participating in an online PLC?</p> <p>b. What challenges do teachers face when participating in an online PLC?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Members' teaching approaches (Section 5.2): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Learner-centred classes - Being approachable, friendly - Training students to be responsible towards their learning • Motivation to participate in the PLC (Section 5.3): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Peer pressure - Self-development - Addressing needs - Learning good teaching practices - Interest in action research • Experiences in the PLC (Section 5.4): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Communication and collaboration during and outside meetings - Creation of a positive environment - Focus on members' interests • Perceived benefits of participating in the PLC (Section 5.5): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Knowing about other levels - Improving learning skills - Supporting meetings with literature - Changes in practices • Challenges Faced (Section 5.6): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Workload - Time issues - Technical issues

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluating the PLC⁴ (Section 5.7): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Members' reactions - Members' learning - Organizational support and change - Members' use of new knowledge and skills - Student learning outcomes
<p>2. Based on the strengths and challenges of participating in the PLC, how can it be improved and utilised to enhance both teacher and student learning?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ideas for improvement to create a sustainable PLC (Section 5.8): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Managerial support - Going deep in professional learning - Having more members of the PLC - Being more active - Assigning a team leader - Building a positive environment

Some of the characteristics of Bolam et al. (2005) informed the identification of subthemes in Table 9. For instance, under the theme of experiences of the PLC come the subthemes of collaboration and creating a positive environment. These relate to the Bolam et al. (2005) characteristics of collaboration, focused on learning and mutual trust, respect and support. Table 12 shows a comparison of these characteristics with the present study findings and common thematic elements in Section 5.9's conclusion of this chapter.

Because one or more than one research tool identified some of the themes, these data appear together. In other words, the findings that support each theme in each research tool appear together in one section discussing that theme. This is because the findings of one source support the findings of other sources, and they intertwine. Notably, some screenshots appear as evidence of how meetings proceeded and to show evidence of the discussions and posts shared during and after the meetings in MS Teams. Figure 6 shows each theme and the source(s) of evidence supporting it.

⁴ This theme draws on the five levels of evaluation of Guskey (2014).

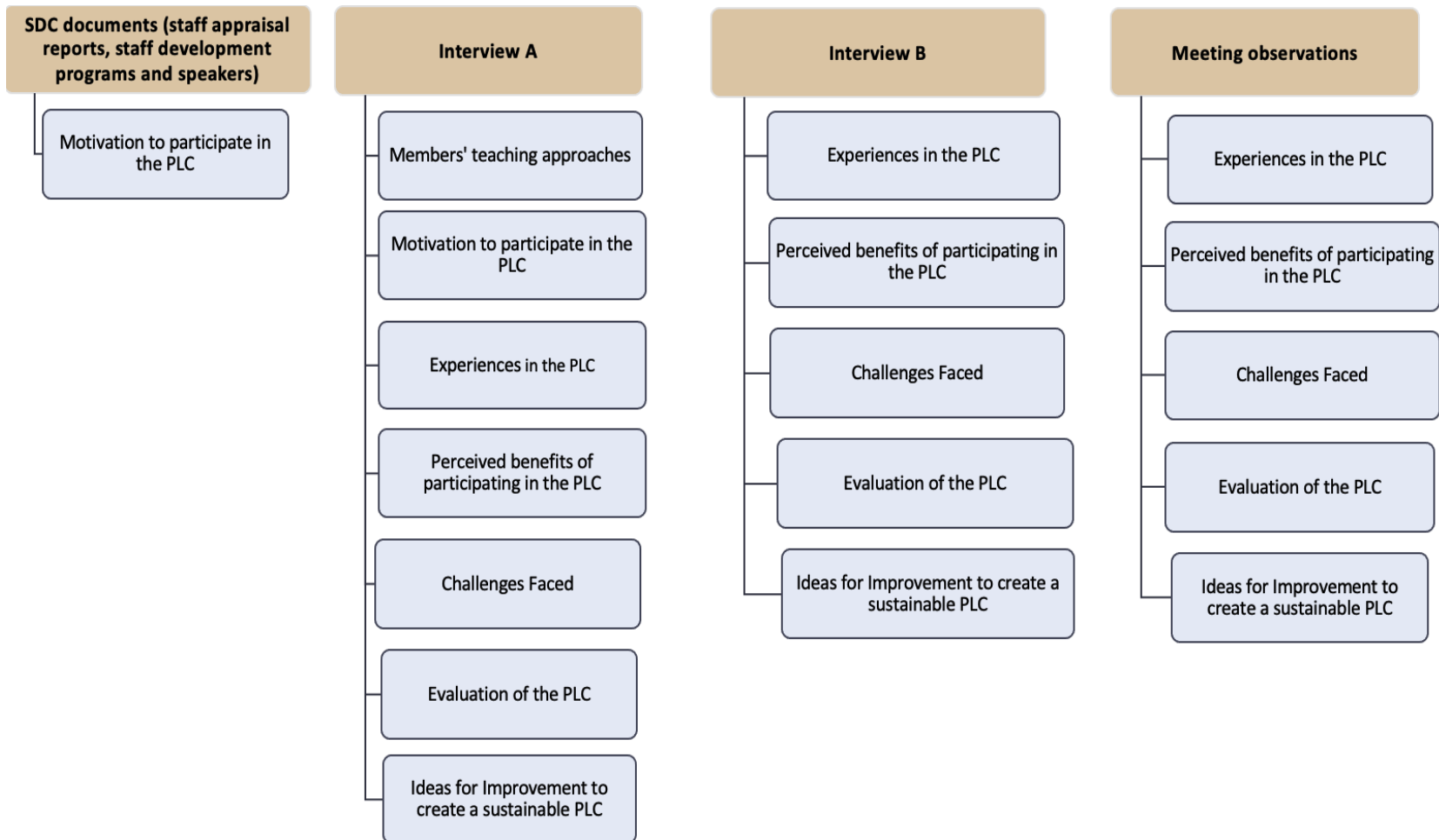


Figure 6: Sources of Evidence Supporting the Themes

5.2 Members' Teaching Approaches

It was found that the members had teaching approaches and perceptions of the teaching and learning process that were very similar to one another. For instance, Emma's response showed that learners are central in this process; how they learn and develop forms the basis of education. She said,

I am a person who demands that they work more than I do, and I am a person who will present a question and I ask very much that they answer that question. I will give them time to answer that question. I will explain the question to them... Once I've asked a question, I do need an answer. I tend to avoid lecturing and I try to make things student-centred. (Interview A)

Emma believed that the students should do more than the teacher and that the class should be student-centred and focused on learning. Similar to her approach were the approaches used by Noora and Sally, who both mentioned that they are strict with their students to urge them to work hard and focus on learning.

Furthermore, Paul, Steven and Sally perceived themselves as being approachable teachers. They were ready to help, listen to their students, and solve their problems. For example, Paul said, "I am very friendly and they think I care to talk to them. I care to understand their problem" (Interview A). Mary's beliefs about teaching and learning focused on being a fair and responsible teacher who needs to remind students of what to do all the time. She said,

[I] am the one who always reminds them of the important things that they have to do in class and remind them also in every way possible that I can reach them as regards to their academic performance. (Interview A)

Sheila spotlighted taking the responsibility to remind students about their work, training them to be responsible for their learning and caring about their performance. She believed that students still did not understand why they were in higher education and what they should learn. She said,

I'm a good teacher, and they would want me to be there in their other levels too... I believe their schooling is something which doesn't tell them what they need to learn. I'm not against their schooling system, but I believe there's something lacking in their school education and so they lack the motivation and it takes time for students to adjust. And I believe I can bridge that gap. It might take that long, but then I can bridge that gap. (Interview A)

This excerpt explicates why Mary and Sheila believed that some of their responsibilities as teachers were to remind students about their tasks, encourage them to do their work, and be more motivated to learn and develop. Overall, members' beliefs about the teaching and learning process indicate their willingness to help their students learn in every possible way, which provided significant motivation for them to be members of the PLC. The following section highlights members' motivation to participate in detail.

5.3 Motivation to Participate in the PLC

Since participation in this study was voluntary, teachers were given the freedom to decide whether to participate in the PLC. Thus, the members had specific motives to be part of the PLC. Emma said that although she wanted to learn something new, the main reason for her participation was peer pressure. Her friend, who encouraged her to participate, also participated but later withdrew from the study. Emma said,

To be honest, I was told to join it by Huda and then... So you you could put down peer pressure perhaps. Is that? That yeah, the reason completely, honestly, because I had no idea what the semester would be like. I had no idea what time I would have or any of that. I'm always happy to receive professional development or to participate rather in professional development. But really, I didn't know what to expect. (Interview A)

Emma was new to the institution and she agreed to participate because she was influenced by her friend Huda, who was the only person she knew well in this place. She and her friend had been colleagues at another higher education institution in Oman.

Other members indicated that they participated because they believed in self-development and continuous professional learning. For instance, Robert said, “the teacher is not merely a teacher, he is also a learner” (Interview A). Robert thought that learning should not stop; teachers need to continue learning in order to develop their teaching skills. For Robert, the PLC was a community in which he could continue learning and developing. Similarly, Sheila perceived herself as follows: “a person who believes that whatever I do, I get a chance to learn something new” (Interview A). Thus, she believed the PLC would help her understand her students and her class.

Another reason that teachers participated in the PLC was that it directly addressed their needs. As mentioned in Chapter 4, in order to establish the content of the online PLC, the members were asked to identify the areas they wanted to focus on. They were given a form to fill in with their information and the areas they wanted to focus on in the PLC (see Appendix 9). Then, I analysed these interests and listed the areas highlighted by most of the members. They were seven areas in total. They are listed in Table 10. However, because of various factors – such as the length of the semester and other responsibilities and tasks teachers had to complete – four areas were selected. It is worth highlighting that the general plan and focus of the PLC were explained during the recruitment process, so all of the members expressed their desire to participate to focus on areas directly related to their needs and those of their students. During the selection process, I selected four areas, keeping in mind that all of the members had selected one or more of them to maintain their interest in working in the PLC. Those areas were: 1) critical thinking skills, 2) intrinsic motivation, 3) learner autonomy, and 4) error correction in writing.

Table 10: The Topics Selected by the PLC Members

How to Increase Motivation
Critical Thinking Skills
Learner Autonomy
Developing English Basic Skills
Action Research
Language Testing
Error and Correction in Students’ Written Work

In Interview A, Noora expressed her desire to only attend sessions that were directly related to her needs and preferred not to attend mandatory professional development (PD) sessions run at the departmental or university level that do not relate to her interests. Therefore, she found that attending the PLC would be useful as it was tailored to her needs. It is worth mentioning that there was a kind of similarity between the topics spotlighted in the PLC and the ones suggested in the PD reports. In other words, some of the areas that the members selected for the PLC, such as motivation, were highlighted as staff training needs based on the staff appraisal report (AY19/20).

In addition, the areas pointed out by staff members in SDC reports were not limited to teaching and classroom practices. For example, the Internal Staff Development Programme reports indicated that there were activities elicited from areas staff suggested in their appraisal. Also, there were activities arranged by the SDC on general areas such as quality assurance and general policies at the institution such as standardising General Foundation Programme (GFP) with other university branches, conducting activities to implement those standards and other common policies such as spelling policies and exam-related procedures.

This variation was welcomed by some members, such as Sally, who believed that attending any session, including those that were not directly related to her needs, would also be useful. She said,

I think I should attend to any session not just based on what I need. It is also whatever that pick my interests. Maybe there's certain things that is not related to my fellow my students' need but, I'm interested in it, because I just want to learn something new. (Interview A)

By analysing the SDC reports, it is apparent that the target institution has been paying attention to promoting staff learning and development by organizing presentations and workshops led by internal and external speakers. Appendix 4 lists some of the PD sessions conducted by speakers from the target institution in the 2019/2020 academic year. Additionally, Appendix 5 lists sessions provided for the target institution staff featuring external speakers in the same academic year.

In addition to their specific needs, some members perceived the PLC as an opportunity to learn good practices and improve their own teaching methods in general. For example, Mary said,

I think this is a one good practice that we have to continue doing because it's somehow an opportunity for us to, learn from one another from those very good practices as well as those things that we need to improve on. And you know learning ideas from peers or fellow teachers are also good. (Interview A)

Another motive was the interest in action research expressed by Paul. By participating in this study, he wanted to get experience with how PLCs work because the institution had not previously had them. He said,

I'm really interested in any research work... my interest in research in teaching, especially in action research, as a matter of fact happened after I read a book... I wanted to get first-hand experience from a researcher. We never had professional learning committees like this exactly. Of course, we had a research team and all that, but nothing like this. I think it seems to be a kind of a new research methodological idea. So I just wanted to get first-hand experience of that. (Interview A)

5.4 Experiences in the PLC

This section highlights members' experiences in the PLC. It mainly focuses on how the meetings went, members' views and their interactions with one another. These themes are presented in terms of the following sub-sections. They are communication and collaboration during and outside meeting timings, creation of a positive environment and focus on members' interests

5.4.1 Communication and Collaboration During and Outside Meeting Timings

In their interviews, all of the members mentioned that they liked and benefited from sharing ideas and classroom experiences in the PLC online meetings that took place almost every two weeks. For instance, Emma appreciated the collaboration and sharing of ideas in the PLC, which focused on the members and did not follow a lecture style. It is worth mentioning that it was made clear from the first communication with the members that the PLC would focus on and be run by the members themselves. The first meeting was a bit researcher-led because the members had not yet experienced working in a PLC. I continued to ask questions about the members' experiences and follow-up questions to maintain the flow of the discussion. However, my role decreased gradually

in the subsequent meetings because the members knew each other better. In addition – as the members stated in their interviews and as I observed during the meetings – the ways in which the members responded to one another were encouraging because they did not criticise each other. They commented respectfully and listened attentively to the points raised during the meetings. They reflected on almost every point; sometimes, they returned to points that had been raised earlier in the meetings.

Similarly, Steven commented on the flow of the discussions and said, “I thought that the communication in the hour that we had every two weeks was a good thing and that there were no silent moments and everyone spoke and collaborated” (Interview B). This collaboration, which several members stressed, took many forms. For example, during the PLC meetings, it was observed that the members were willing to share their favourite classroom practices. For instance, in the second meeting, the members shared their classroom experiences in terms of how they encouraged their students to think critically and justify their thoughts and answers using techniques such as using open questions and concept-checking questions. Steven said,

I think the use of concept checking questions [CCQs], which is not so dissimilar to what Barbara is saying there in terms of asking them to write the sentence, not just taking from the student that yes, I've learnt this word. I mean, you can never assume that they actually have learnt that word until you see that word in use. I think you know that for me comes under the concept checking. I mean that that's the phrase I use for it. That's something that I would also be looking to use today and tomorrow is the introduction of CCQ. Another thing, another tactic that that I may. You guys obviously have not met the students. I'll be meeting them in about an hour time. And every class is going to be different in in the dynamics. But another tool at my disposal would be opening closed questions and so trying to promote open questions as opposed to closed questions, which obviously give again that impoverished one-word answer. It is not desirable in in the language classroom and quite often showing the students in the class the difference between an open and closed question is enough to promote the use of open questions, which again gives a much better use of language. (Week Two Meeting)

Another form of collaboration took place outside of MS Teams. Some members had “corridor” chats before or after the PLC meetings, in which they took conversations from the meetings further and shared more ideas. For instance, Sally said,

What happened is usually after every PLC or sometimes some PLC session, if there's something that is interesting, I actually go to the teacher and then we just sit there. We share more practices and I say, Oh, I heard you're having this issue in the meeting, so this is what I do and then the teacher said Oh, I've done that as well, but it doesn't work. We start to discuss a lot more outside the meeting. And then after that, we'll just see each other and say hey your method works. I think that's fun, it is interesting or we say it didn't work for my students, but it's a great sharing session. (Interview A)

Sheila experienced corridor chats as well. She said, “So even in the corridor, if you see [Paul] walking, he would say, OK, you said this in the meeting. Wasn't it like this? So it's like, OK, we can discuss freely” (Interview B). These kinds of chats that were taking place in corridors demonstrate the effect of PLC meetings. In other words, what was discussed during meetings was so important to members that they kept thinking and talking about it whenever they had the opportunity to do so.

However, corridor chats were limited to a few members. Others scarcely found time to fulfil the requirements of other administration and teaching tasks. Steven said,

That there is very little time for collaboration outside of the PLC. I think the coming together moment is during the PLC and that's what it serves because outside we're busy filling in attendance forms, checking students understand the online library system, check in with me how to book office hours, checking they will be OK for the test, checking, checking, checking. We're so consumed and caught up in our daily thing that I think that the meeting itself is the hang on a second, let's put everything aside for one moment and let's think about what we're doing here. (Interview A)

This quote illustrates how frustrated and tied up teachers were with other required tasks. This situation was pointed out by many members in their interviews, including Paul, Emma and Sheila. It is worth mentioning that such administrative requirements were one of the difficulties that hindered the members from participating in the PLC more effectively (see Section 5.6.1 for more detail).

However, the main purpose of the PLC was reached only in its last weeks. In other words, as previously mentioned, there was collaboration during the meetings in terms of sharing ideas and opinions, but it was very limited. Nevertheless, it was noticed in the second half of the semester that members supported one another in learning from one another's practices and reflecting on them; the members shared not only opinions but materials, links and documents. For example, during one meeting, Sally shared her screen to show a draft of her students' writing (see Figure 7). She explained the way she marked the errors students made in their writing by putting comments in brackets. Her students followed those comments and edited their second drafts accordingly. It is worth mentioning that these students were in the Post-Foundation Programme and had high English levels. This method of giving feedback may not be applicable to lower levels in the Foundation Programme, as stated by members such as Sheila and Noora, who were teaching lower levels.

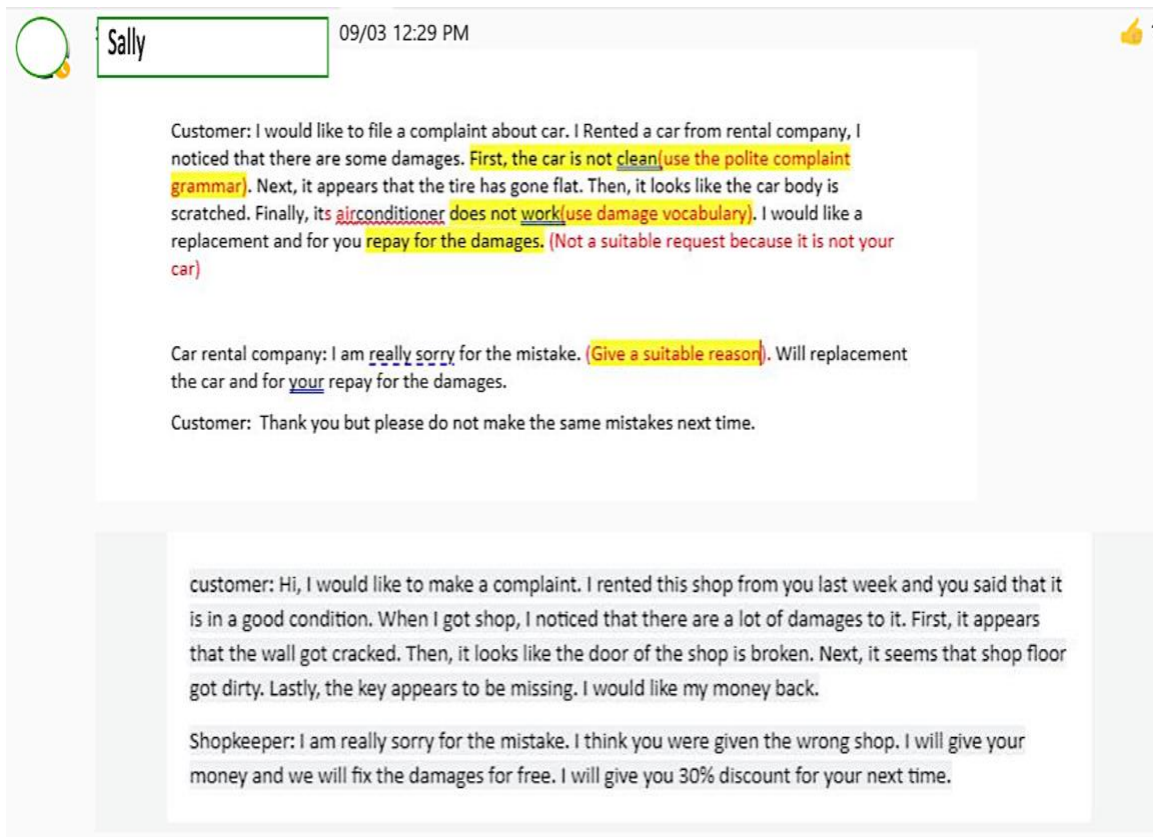


Figure 7: Sharing a Screen by Sally During One Meeting

It is worth noting that when Interview A was conducted, I stressed the importance of extending communication after the meetings. Although this had been mentioned at the very start of the study, I once again emphasised that the nature of the study required online interactions and maximising the use of MS Teams. Hence, during the second half of the semester, some members tried to be active by posting and commenting on posts. For instance, one member, Emily, shared a link for using crossword puzzles in class via MS Teams. She used crossword puzzles as a way to help her students overcome the spelling errors they tended to make in their writing (see Figure 8).

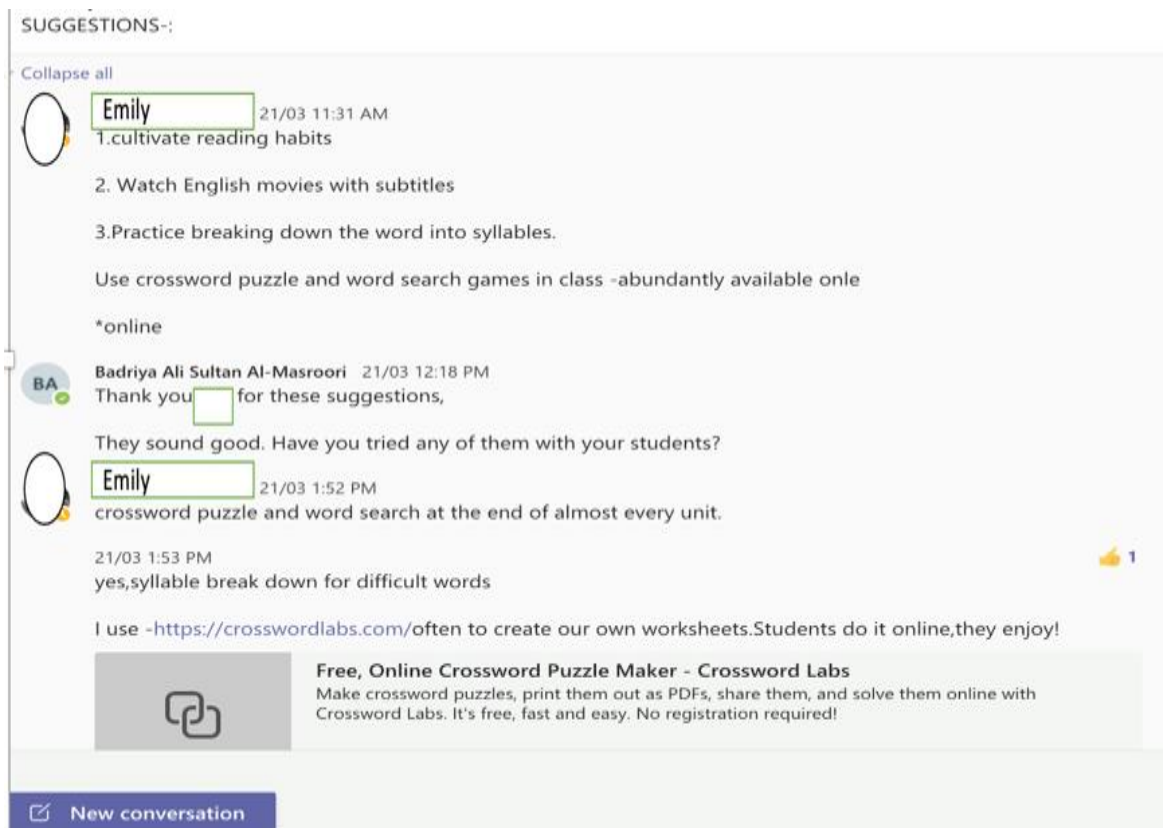


Figure 8: Suggesting Techniques on Spelling Errors

Additionally, Sally was an active member who tended to talk a lot during meetings and share her thoughts and classroom experiences. She also tried to make MS Teams an interactive platform and took the initiative to post questions. Figure 9 illustrates how limited interaction was outside the meetings. Sally posted a question and nobody replied except me. Figure 9 shows that I responded by answering Sally's question and asking another question to encourage Sally to post again and show appreciation for her interaction. By posting the question, I also aimed to encourage all members to respond and communicate but nobody replied to the post.

The screenshot shows a forum post by a user named Sally, dated 15/03 11:20 AM. The post lists ten criteria for types of errors in writing. Below the list, Sally asks a question about feedback preferences. A reply from Badriya Ali Sultan Al-Masroori (BA), dated 15/03 12:26 PM, responds to Sally's question. The reply is partially visible and discusses the preference for direct feedback.

Sally 15/03 11:20 AM 👍 1

types of errors. These criteria include:

- 1) Inability to perform the assigned task because of not understanding the question.
- 2) No introduction
- 3) Lack of main ideas
- 4) No topic sentence stating the main points
- 5) Lack of development of the main ideas (adding details and facts about the main point)
- 6) Lack of organization
- 7) Accumulation of errors in sentence structure and / or usage
- 8) No transitional words
- 9) Incoherence
- 10) No conclusion

I think this is something we see in students almost every semester. How do others give feedback to this? When I was n level 1 and level 4, I usually use a mixed of direct and indirect feedback. I even asked some of my students today, what kind of feedback do they find most useful?

They answered direct but with more explanation of why they got it wrong

[See less](#)

BA Badriya Ali Sultan Al-Masroori 15/03 12:26 PM 👍 1

Interesting **Sally** I think they prefer direct feedback as this kind of feedback doesn't require as much effort and thinking as the indirect feedback. What do you think **Sally**? What about other members? How do you give feedback to the errors that **Sally** has attached?

↩ Reply

Figure 9: Lack of Response on Questions Posted Outside Meeting Time

Unlike Sally who tended to comment on almost every point raised during meetings, some members, such as Robert and Noora, preferred to be silent and listen to others most of the time before they shared their own experiences. Furthermore, one member, Emma, preferred to type her comments and opinions during meeting times instead of sharing them verbally. However, towards the second half of the semester, Emma became more active by sharing more of her experiences and perceptions verbally. Figure 10 and Figure 11 show the written comments that Emma offered during meetings.

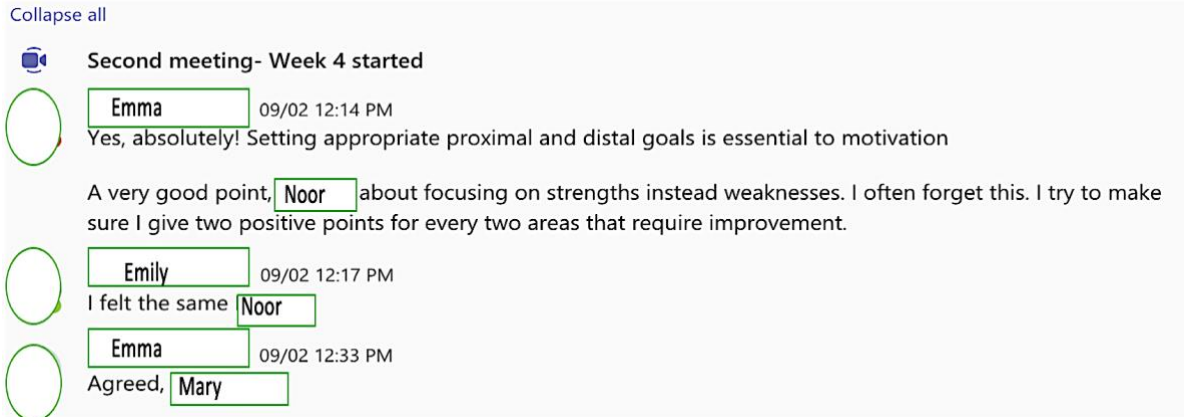


Figure 10: Emma’s written Comments During Week 4 Meeting

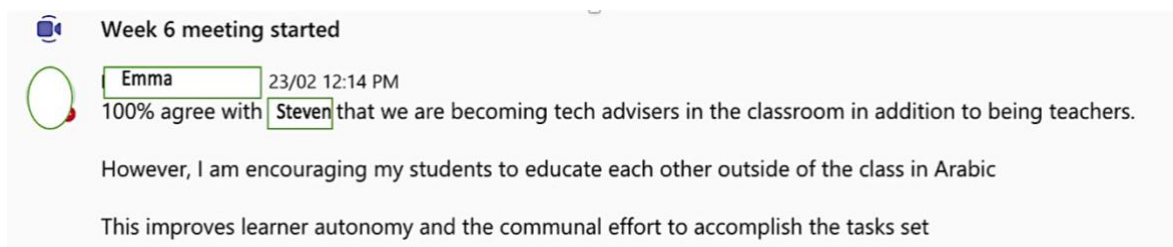


Figure 11: Emma’s Written Comments During Week 6 Meeting

Furthermore, there were interactions and reflections on comments that were posted just after the meetings. This could be attributed to the fact that all members were free for one hour after the PLC meetings, so they were still logged on to MS Teams to finish other tasks. In addition, they had just finished the PLC meeting and thus their minds were still fresh with the points discussed in the meeting and could recall and reflect on them easily and quickly. Figure 12 displays a comment posted by Paul concerning a point that he had already raised in the meeting and how other members replied to it. The meeting was about how to develop students’ critical thinking skills.

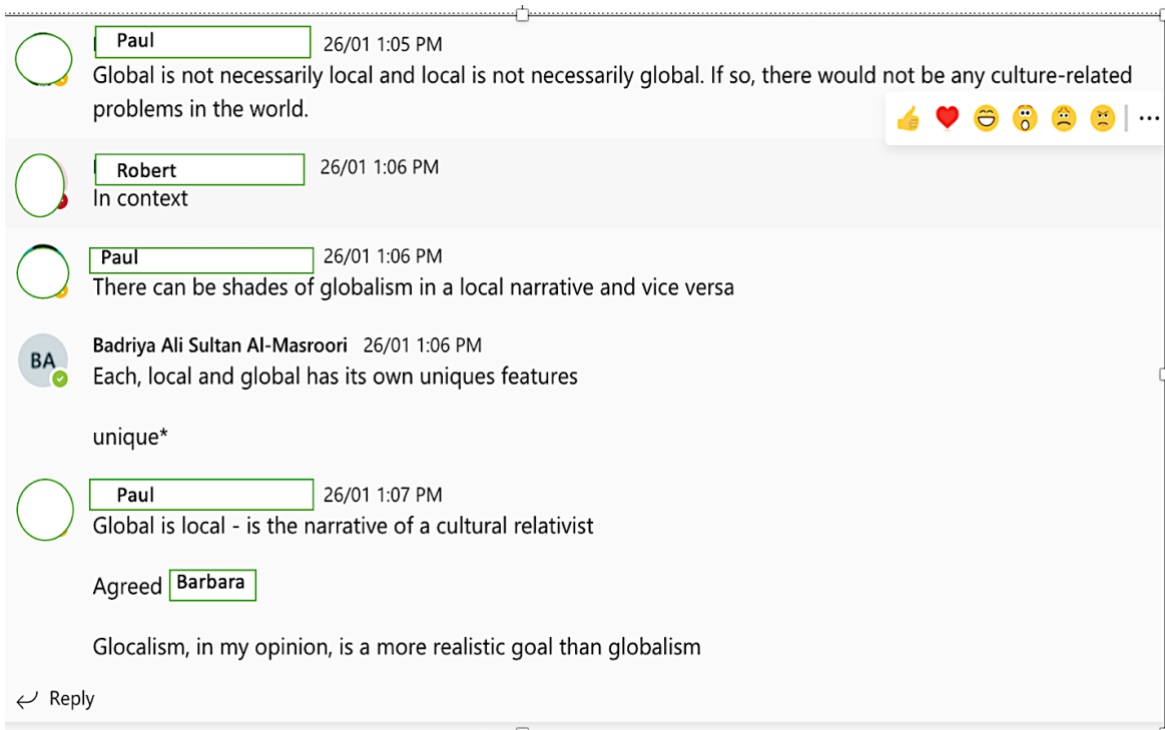


Figure 12: Members’ Communication after Critical Thinking Skills Meeting

Furthermore, just before the members had a meeting to discuss the errors students made in their writing, Sally created a poll in MS Teams. Members could respond to this poll either during or immediately after that meeting. The poll was about direct and indirect feedback.

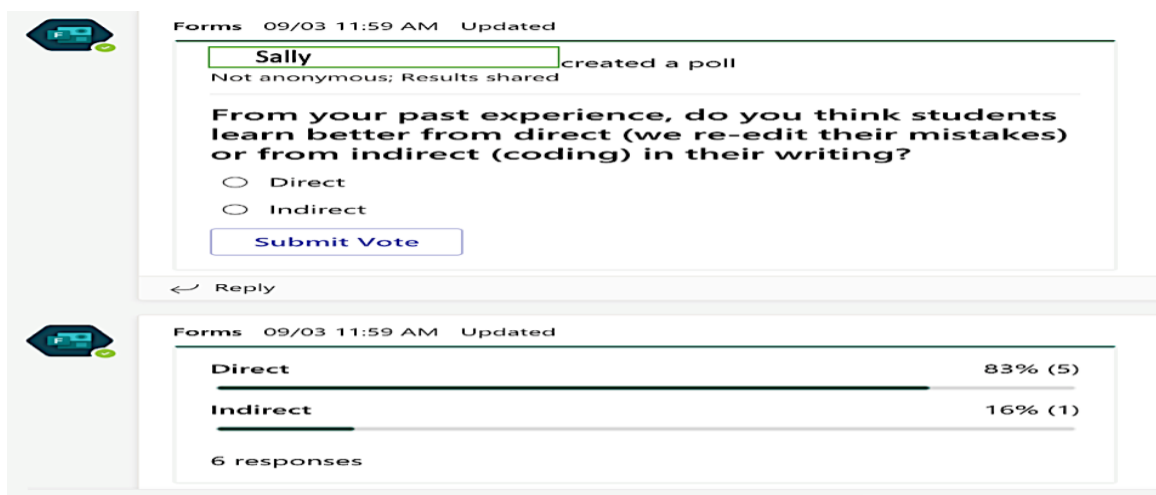


Figure 13: A Poll Created by Sally in MS Teams

Figure 13 shows the poll in which the members had to vote on which kind of feedback they preferred. Six members responded to the poll. During the meeting, the members shared their experiences with giving feedback on writing and the challenges they faced in terms of doing so online and the language levels of their students. They also highlighted the importance of this area as a topic to discuss and work on. It was observed that the members were open when sharing their experiences and supported one another in the challenges they faced, hence creating a positive atmosphere for professional learning. This is illustrated in the following section.

5.4.2 Creation of a Positive Environment

When reflecting on their experiences in the PLC, the members stated that it had a positive and encouraging environment which allowed them to understand each other's views and experiences. For example, Emma said the members were encouraged to share their ideas. She said of the members: "They're willing to listen. They're willing to share in a very friendly way" (Interview A). The PLC helped Emma understand her colleagues better. This was because – due to online teaching – she could not find time to chat and communicate with other teachers in her office. The PLC provided her with the opportunity to get to know other teachers and for them to support one another. She said,

So it's definitely been helpful in getting to know my co-workers better and this is I think why I would like to hear from a larger range of people within the discussion

so that I can also get a better gauge of who they are and and interact with them more. (Interview A)

In addition, the members expressed that they could sense an atmosphere of trust and respect among the members of the PLC. Paul said, “I didn’t feel any kind of hesitation in expressing my opinion. I trusted them all” (Interview B). Paul was active during meetings by sharing his opinions and the challenges he faced in each area discussed. Also, in one meeting, he wanted to stress his perspective on the local and the global when discussing how to develop students’ critical thinking skills, so he posted his view immediately after the meeting as an end note. Other members reacted to it (see Figure 12). The way the members communicated with each other during meetings and in their posts shows that respect encouraged them to express their opinions and their viewpoints of others’ perspectives.

Aligning with respect and trust, Steven said that he could sense transparency and openness among the PLC members. He said,

For the most of it, people were honest. I think when you work like that with people, there has to be an open and honest revealing of what our practices are and the transparency, I think is important. Not everybody is transparent, but I felt that the PLC group were transparent and we’re happy to talk and share their experiences. (Interview B)

This quote supports what Emma and Paul felt in terms of the positive atmosphere of the PLC.

However, for Sheila, trust and support were associated with people who had the same levels of motivation and willingness to share and learn, which she did find but only with a few members. She said,

I would say working with a like-minded colleague, a like-minded person would really help. A group should be of people who aim for the same thing, who really have the curiosity to learn and share things... I'm sorry to say, but then every time you don't have members in the group who would be willing to share what they do or to support others to learn. So I would say yes working with a colleague who is of same like-mindedness and has a vision to achieve something, it would be a great

experience to work. We have [Steven, Paul, Noora...]. These are a few of the people who always talk. You said this, don't you think this is like this? (Interview B)

In this quote, Sheila raised an important point regarding a shared vision and motivation to work for the same goal. Unlike other members who indicated how happy they were to share views and work with other members of the PLC, Sheila could only feel trust towards some members – those who talked a lot during meetings — while she thought of others as being different from her in terms of their visions. Her viewpoint could be attributed to the nature of interaction during meetings. In the previous interview excerpt, she identified some members as being like-minded. Those members discussed what Sheila shared in meetings more than other members. They asked her questions about her experiences and stated whether they had experienced the same thing in their classes. In addition, those members did not stop their discussions when meetings finished. They had corridor chats about what they had discussed in the meetings (see Section 5.4.1).

Generally speaking, this positive environment was present in all the PLC meetings. The members exchanged their opinions and shared their experiences freely. Moreover, they stressed the difficulties they faced with their students. For instance, when the focus of the meeting was critical thinking skills, the members highlighted how they used different ways of teaching to encourage students to think critically based on their levels in English. They also suggested ways for teachers with low-level students to motivate them to develop their language skills and critical thinking skills, such as peer teaching. The way the members discussed their viewpoints illustrated that they had no hesitation or fear of being underestimated or disrespected. They openly shared their perspectives and stances, regardless of whether they had experienced the same situation.

Although all members agreed that there was trust and respect in the PLC, it was observed that not all members were active during meetings. Some members participated more than others, who tended to listen more than take part in conversations. In the last meeting, Noora attributed her lack of participation to having had no time to read the articles and think about them. This challenge is discussed in Section 5.6.2. During the first half of the semester, I had to call names to ask some members to share their thoughts and perspectives. As more meetings were conducted, the members started to discuss and reflect more than they had before. This could be attributed to being more

familiar with other members and developing trust among the team. For instance, in the first PLC meeting after midterm exams, Paul had volunteered to present a summary of one of the articles that I had shared as a preparation for the meeting. However, he had another meeting just before the PLC meeting and joined a few minutes late. So, another member decided to summarise the article and Paul built on that summary when he joined.

5.4.3 Focus on Members' Interests

One key feature of the PLC that encouraged the members to participate in it was that it could spotlight specific areas that were directly related to their interests. As indicated in Section 5.2, one of the reasons the members were motivated to take part in the present study was that the PLC topics matched their interests.

Additionally, during meetings, I noticed that for every topic the members discussed, they linked the articles they had read to their classroom practices and stressed the significance of focusing on those topics and improving them. For example, in the Week 2 meeting, the members reflected on the circles of critical thinking explicated in one of the articles shared on MS Teams and how they were implemented in reading classes and speaking exams. Furthermore, in the Week 8 Meeting, the members discussed the techniques they used to give feedback on students' writing. They also discussed whether direct or indirect feedback worked with their students and helped them improve their writing.

In general, meeting observations and interviews revealed that the members appreciated the fact that the PLC focused on topics derived from the needs that they submitted to me before it started. Emma said that she liked the topics of the PLC (Interview A). Similarly, Sheila acknowledged the topics that were discussed in the PLC and the research articles sent related to each one. She said,

[T]here were situations when I opened Google and said OK, what is happening around me in the world? I was so aloof. What are the latest topics? What are people working on? Because I stopped my research long back, so joining in PLC is like sort of hope that I should start my research work. (Interview A)

For Sheila, participating in the PLC was a good opportunity and motivation for her to start reading again and update herself on the latest research in the areas targeted by the PLC. She indicated that it had been a long time since she last read about those areas and her participation would enable her to start thinking about doing research and developing her skills. Similarly, Noora expressed a desire to complete a doctorate, although she had been unable to do so. Therefore, she found it useful to be part of a research project and accompany doctoral students to learn from them and support them in their research. She said,

I love to be a part of something that is related to research. I think that I can learn a lot. I think being in company of people who are doing research, that has motivated me. (Interview A)

The members were also interested in knowing more about and understanding the target community of students by learning from the experiences of others at the institution. For example, Emma – who was a foreign teacher – said that she liked the topics discussed in the PLC because they allowed her to understand Omani culture and her students better. She said,

I like the topics that we're discussing and it's very helpful people within the PLC have varying years of experience within Oman, and obviously any country has a particular context which you need to take into account while teaching. (Interview A)

This quote shows the significance of creating PLCs in the Omani context as teachers come from different countries and have had different experiences, so they need to understand the local context.

Moreover, some members elucidated that they were so eager to reflect on and share ideas from their classes and experiences that they did not want to miss any meetings despite their busy schedules. One of them was Mary. In her interview, she mentioned that she tried to manage the tasks she had and allocate some time for PLC meetings because of the benefits of interacting with the other members. She pointed out that she learned a lot and, after each meeting, something stuck in her mind. She said,

[T]here might be instances that other members were not available because they were preoccupied of something that would come into their way. So somehow that's

understandable because I also experienced that. It's just that I really squeeze this in my schedule so that I would not miss any of our meetings... there were really struggles, but then it paid off whenever at the end of our session. The insights that we learn from exchanging ideas from one another somehow stuck to my mind personally and has able to made me ponder on the things that I really need to do and I need to adjust as with my students and in class. (Interview A)

Although Paul had an interest in the topics discussed in the PLC, he had a different perspective, believing that the group should be given plenty of time to work on each topic. He believed that two meetings per area would not be sufficient if the purpose was to deepen the members' knowledge of it. One of the key elements of the PLC that members perceived was that they focused on one topic. For instance, Paul said,

I believe is that a professional learning community should be a devoted community given to the pursuit of knowledge in appointed field because it is not possible that we talk of one field in one meeting and then go to another field in another meeting. I don't think that's going to serve the purpose. It's not going to broaden or deepen our worldview. Maybe it may broaden our worldview, but not deepen. (Interview A)

Because semesters are short at the target institution and in order to match the interests of all members, the PLC focused on four areas that matched the interests of the members. Paul would have preferred to have one topic to spotlight for the whole semester to learn about deeply, although he found it interesting to discuss all of the topics and link them to his classroom practices.

Additionally, the phrases the members used in their interactions and reflections during the PLC meetings – such as “just thinking of Steven’s point...”, “if I may add to her point...”, “I completely agree with your point” and “that is a good point” – demonstrate that the members were interested in each other’s ideas and relating them to their classes. In each meeting, the members indicated the relevance of the PLC areas to their classes and the challenges they faced with the online mode of teaching and learning. They also discussed techniques that they had used or found useful from the articles they read before each meeting. This kind of qualitative expression of their interests and needs was missing in the PD committee reports, which used a Likert scale to present staff

satisfaction with PD sessions. Furthermore, the nature of the PLC provided the members with the mode of work they preferred for professional learning. In other words, in the SDC Annual Report AY19/20, it was mentioned that staff did not like presentation-based PD and wanted hands-on activities. In the PLC, there were no presentations. All members shared their ideas and experiences and reflected on their current practices, hence increasing their motivation to participate in the PLC.

5.5 Perceived Benefits of Participating in the PLC

After participating in the PLC, the members highlighted that it was a beneficial experience for them. They pointed out the benefits they gained towards the end of the PLC. This section spotlights those benefits.

5.5.1 Knowing about Other Levels

Some members elucidated that the PLC meetings enabled them to learn more about other levels of study. At the target institution, as at many other higher education institutions, students in the foundation and post-foundation levels take English courses to be able to study their specialisations in English. This is because English is the medium of instruction at this institution, except for a few specialisations such as the Arabic Language, Islamic Religion, History and Geography. Instructors teach one level per semester. Sometimes, they teach the same level for more than one semester. Therefore, they know more about the level they teach than they do about levels which they have never taught before. Since the members of the PLC were teaching different levels in the foundation and post-foundation programmes, this provided an opportunity for them to learn about the levels they were not teaching during that semester. For instance, Robert said,

[A]ll these meetings were quite vital for us, for me, especially I think because I'm teaching at level two now. I may teach at level three or four, or even I may teach at level one. Or I may go to post foundation. So wherever I go, I have to teach students that may need different skills or skills that other levels don't need. So getting those ideas are really very valuable. (Interview B)

Moreover, some members had not taught all of the levels in the foundation and post-foundation programmes. Thus, when other members shared their experiences and reflected on their classroom practices, the members could form a picture of the nature of other levels and the anticipated

challenges they may face teaching those levels in the future. They also got ideas they may use teaching at those levels.

The same notion was stressed by Steven. He said, “I learned a lot of what other people are doing at different levels” (Interview B). This was because the PLC had members from all levels at the target institution. Also, as indicated in Chapter 4, it was some members’ first year of teaching in Oman, while others had more than ten years of experience at the target institution.

5.5.2 Improving Learning Skills

Another benefit of the PLC was that it improved the members’ learning skills. Mary stated that the PLC had given her the opportunity to learn good practices from other members. In addition, when talking about the challenges she faced, Mary stated that she found the PLC useful because other members suggested ways of how they managed similar situations in their classes. She said,

I think this is a one good practice that we have to continue doing because it’s somehow an opportunity for us to, learn from one another from those very good practices as well as those things that we need to improve on. And you know learning ideas from peers or fellow teachers are also good. (Interview A)

Paul supported Mary’s opinion and indicated that group work was useful because it could support or reject prejudices. He said, “So the individual has a lot to learn if they work in groups because the group itself actually is a great filter of prejudices” (Interview B). This was also observed in the PLC meetings. For instance, during the Week 4 Meeting, the members focused on learner autonomy and motivation in their discussions. They spotlighted intrinsic motivation as lasting longer than extrinsic motivation. One of the teachers had the notion that she could increase students’ motivation through marks. A significant debate ensued and some members stressed that regardless of students’ linguistic levels, teachers need to find ways to motivate their students intrinsically and make them learn for the sake of learning instead of marks. In other words, such discussions helped the members filter their beliefs and look at their prejudices from different angles.

Furthermore, Robert said, “When we are discussing, we are interacting with others. We listen to others’ viewpoints. So that way many other skills also develop. Then we also know the use of language, what kind of language we are using as teachers as professionals” (Interview B). He explained that the PLC meetings helped the members know the language and terms that are used in the educational field. Throughout the meetings, the members discussed various areas and used terms such as “the ideal self” when talking about motivation and mentioned types of errors when talking about error correction in writing.

5.5.3 Supporting Meetings with Literature

As part of the PLC, I sent the members one (or more) article each week related to the area they were discussing and concentrating on that week or the following week(s). Those articles were sent a few days before the meetings so the members had sufficient time to review them. The initial plan was that the members and I would post articles and any other relevant resources. However, in practice, only I sent articles.

Some members expressed regret that they were unable to read all of the articles. However, members such as Mary, Emma and Sheila said that they were helpful and supported the discussions well. Sheila said, “Not only discussions, but articles did help me and I did achieve what I wanted” (Interview B). As indicated earlier, Sheila’s desire to read the latest updates ignited after she started to participate in the PLC. The articles served this purpose for her. She stated, “So, it’s the PLC meetings, this research group had motivated me to start my research, which I never thought of all these years. I just kept it aside. Now I feel like doing it” (Interview B).

Also, the members expressed that they learned from the articles shared through MS Teams. For example, Sally said, “I really enjoy learning and reading a lot of the articles and how they are related to our day-to-day life, like in a workplace” (Interview B). Sally’s opinion of reading the articles aligned with the ideas expressed by Sheila. By reading the articles to prepare for the meetings, they could update their knowledge of current research in the educational field. Additionally, reading the articles helped them link the research to their classes. During meetings, it was observed that the members referred to the articles from time to time to link them to their classroom practices. For instance, in the Week 2 Meeting, the members linked the circles of critical

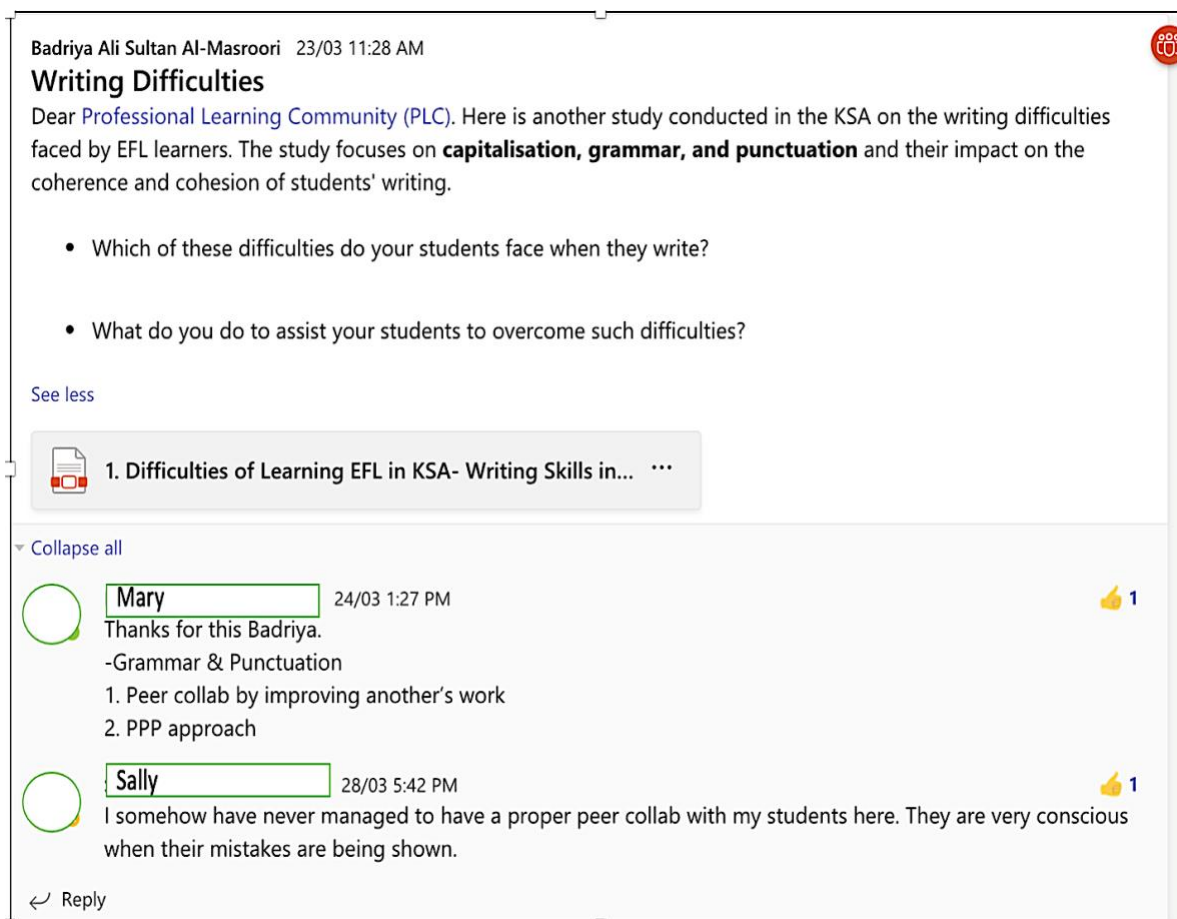
thinking they had read about to their classes and discussed how they subconsciously applied them in the questioning techniques they used in their reading classes.

In addition, members such as Steven described the gradual process of asking questions in a speaking exam and how the questions are divided into three parts, moving from lower to higher levels of thinking. It is worth noting that speaking exams are similar to the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) exam in their pattern. They start by asking questions about the students' backgrounds and daily routines and move to topics and events that require some description and reasoning. Students need to explain the events, why they happened that why and how they feel about them. Then, examiners ask more specific questions that tend to be deeper and require critical thinking and analysis to answer them.

Another example was shown in the Week 6 Meeting. The members had interesting discussions about motivation. They highlighted two types of motivation: intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation, with more focus on the former. This was because the members believed that intrinsic motivation was significantly lacking among their students and that teachers should focus on it to enhance students' learning and encourage them to be autonomous learners. While reflecting on motivation, the members linked the motivation techniques described in the article they had read to their practices and what they did to motivate their students to learn. For example, Sheila pointed out how she used grades as a tool to motivate her students to perform the tasks they were assigned. She stressed her awareness of the notion that grades increase students' extrinsic motivation rather than intrinsic motivation and justified her practice by saying that the very low level of English of her students made her work on extrinsic motivation first to ensure that the students would learn and their English would develop. She perceived that extrinsic motivation would work better for her students because they were only concerned about marks.

In the Week 8 Meeting, the members had a deep discussion about correcting errors in writing, how to give feedback and the difference between direct and indirect feedback. They also stressed the difficulties they faced improving their students' writing skills and those the students faced, such as problems with spelling. This meeting was attended by members who later withdrew from the study. They were from Arab countries, including Oman. Therefore, they had valuable input in

terms of why students tend to make a lot of mistakes and sometimes write essays that are nonsense to teachers from different countries. For example, one of the members addressed that direct translation from Arabic to English was one of the key reasons that students make mistakes because the two languages are different. Also, towards the end of the meeting, some members such as Paul expressed their interest in reading more articles about this topic. I sent the members many articles and a Master's thesis, all of which were based on the Omani context and other similar Arabic contexts. The articles were sent to encourage rich discussions in the meeting and posts in MS Teams. Some members interacted with those posts, but the majority did not. Figure 14 shows an article I posted with some questions and replies from members.



The screenshot shows a Microsoft Teams chat interface. At the top, a post by Badriya Ali Sultan Al-Masroori is dated 23/03 11:28 AM. The post title is "Writing Difficulties". The text of the post reads: "Dear Professional Learning Community (PLC). Here is another study conducted in the KSA on the writing difficulties faced by EFL learners. The study focuses on **capitalisation, grammar, and punctuation** and their impact on the coherence and cohesion of students' writing." Below the text are two bullet points: "Which of these difficulties do your students face when they write?" and "What do you do to assist your students to overcome such difficulties?". A "See less" link is visible below the questions. Below the post is a document icon and the title "1. Difficulties of Learning EFL in KSA- Writing Skills in...". Underneath, there is a "Collapse all" option. Two replies are shown: one from Mary on 24/03 1:27 PM with one thumbs-up, and one from Sally on 28/03 5:42 PM with one thumbs-up. A "Reply" button is at the bottom left.

Badriya Ali Sultan Al-Masroori 23/03 11:28 AM

Writing Difficulties



Dear Professional Learning Community (PLC). Here is another study conducted in the KSA on the writing difficulties faced by EFL learners. The study focuses on **capitalisation, grammar, and punctuation** and their impact on the coherence and cohesion of students' writing.

- Which of these difficulties do your students face when they write?
- What do you do to assist your students to overcome such difficulties?

[See less](#)



1. Difficulties of Learning EFL in KSA- Writing Skills in... ⋮

▼ Collapse all

 **Mary** 24/03 1:27 PM  1

Thanks for this Badriya.
-Grammar & Punctuation

1. Peer collab by improving another's work
2. PPP approach

 **Sally** 28/03 5:42 PM  1

I somehow have never managed to have a proper peer collab with my students here. They are very conscious when their mistakes are being shown.

← Reply

Figure 14: Replies to a Post with an Article and Questions

5.5.4 Changes in Practices

The members pointed out some changes to their practices after they took part in the PLC. They perceived them as positive changes. These changes are highlighted in the following sections.

a. Implementing peer teaching in class

One of the good practices that were shared in the PLC was peer teaching. Sheila implemented this technique in her class and found it useful. Thus, she shared her experiences with peer teaching with the PLC team. Robert liked the idea and implemented it with his students. He explained what he did with his students and said,

So they learnt past simple to write the email, but here they have to use past simple again to write about the past events. In order to make them understand the difference between writing an email and writing a past event, I took help of one student in my class. I took help of that student. He said teacher I understood it, so I asked him now can you please help others to understand this? That student said yes teacher I will explain to them. So I told him can you please explain them in Arabic, so that they can understand better? He did, and students in no time understood it clearly. So what Sheila said, I implemented one of those points and I found it is working actually. (Interview B)

Because both Sheila and Robert were teaching low-level students, they used peer teaching and asked for the help of excellent students in the class. Also, they asked those students to use Arabic when they taught their peers to ensure that the students comprehended the key concepts of the lessons.

b. Linking Activities to the Local Culture

Another practice was shared by Noora in one of the PLC meetings. Noora was struggling with getting her students to be interested in what she was teaching. In Interview A, she attributed students' lack of interest in learning in general to their misconceptions of education. She indicated that she came from a background where education is valued and viewed as something sacred. However, what she noticed in her classes was that most of the students were careless and did not realise that education was important in their lives. Thus, they did not pay attention to their teachers

and did not bother themselves to learn. So, she thought of catching their interest by presenting something related to their own lives and culture to help them think critically. She said,

[W]hen I introduced the book “Celestial Bodies”, they could easily relate. They could easily tell me stories. They could disagree/agree because that story is based on this country. But when I expose them to something that's totally different from their environment, they just listen. They don't respond or think deeply about it. That's what I have experienced. (Week Two Meeting)

The book *Celestial Bodies* is a novel written by an Omani writer. For this reason, Noora’s students were motivated to participate and criticise the events of the story. Robert thought about using reading texts related to the culture of the students and found that those texts were more interesting to them than texts that were beyond their knowledge and culture. He elucidated,

I picked up one of the articles about Oman and I gave them that activity with the questions. I found students taking much more interest in doing that. They were interested because they could know about their own soil or about their own lifestyle here and the society, so they were much more enthusiastic in doing that rather than doing something else. I found the difference because another activity I did it was about some of the technology Giants like Facebook, these owners of Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp... So I gave them but their knowledge was not beyond the use of WhatsApp. They don't know much about the person and the history. So when compared with something that is related to their own soil or own culture, students found it bit interesting to them. (Interview B)

The same practice that Noora shared with the team was also implemented by Sheila in her class. She tried using writing questions about places in Oman instead of places that the students had never been to. She said,

For example, I had a topic or an LO [Learning Outcome] in writing to teach them how to describe a place, so I would never talk about London or Paris. I would talk about Salalah, Nizwa, or Sur. So because of the discussion, this was one great point

which helped me in my teaching that I will only teach them what they are aware of, not something they don't know, they cannot even imagine". (Interview B)

Sheila found this technique very useful and that it had a positive effect on her teaching. This was because her students who were struggling greatly in the writing class could write something and respond better than before.

c. Being Aware of How to Give Feedback in Written Work

As previously stated, one of the areas spotlighted in the PLC was error correction in writing. The members discussed how to give direct and indirect feedback and what could work with their students. Also, they focused on when to use each type of feedback. Sally reflected on this and said,

...and looking into understanding which one would help them better in terms of improving their writing. Whether it's direct or indirect. So having all of that information actually does help, because then it can align me in a way like OK, that's what I'm doing. That works better for my students. Maybe a mix of both. So, I'm a bit more aware on how I give feedback instead of just saying this is how I have always given feedback and I'm not going to change it. (Interview B)

After those meetings, Sally became aware of both types of feedback. It can be observed from her statements that she is an open-minded and flexible person who is willing to see different perspectives of a situation and change her methods when necessary.

Another example was what happened with Steven. He highlighted that he would change his own practices. He said,

What I had been doing and practice that I believe still I still believe it, but I'm going to change my practice and I had begun this semester with direct marking showing marking every single mistake and showing the correct way and suggest and giving suggestions and comments. Now, while I believe that is the best practice in the long run, I'm not with these students for the long term. I'm with them for 12 weeks and I am also grading them and here lies the complexity, and that if I am marking up all of their written work that is later being assessed by myself, what's happening is

I end up marking my own work. I don't think that is the best thing to be or the best place to be. On reflection in my participation in this PLC group, I will be moving to marking symbols. I will be moving to that format next semester. (Interview B)

Steven was using direct feedback when marking students' essays. He decided to change to indirect feedback so that his students would have to work more on their mistakes and search for the right answers and writing structures.

d. Focusing on Motivating Students

Motivation was one of the topics discussed in the PLC meetings. When interviewing her, Sheila said,

[W]hen I saw the articles and we had discussion, I started kind of emotionally emailing my students after learning the motivational articles after doing that. See there's this topic on MyELT and students have to do lots of work on MyELT. I applied this principle of motivation there and I said OK. See if you do MyELT, I give you 5 marks. So students have 25 marks which are given by teachers for their behavior, their participation and their work. So I said exclusively 5 marks for the students who do MyELT and if it is 100%, I guarantee 5 marks. And then every week I would show five marks. Some template I prepared wherein I put five marks. This is your five marks. And to my surprise, I can show you this work, which I did. I I will just put it on to your chat now. We collected the data from the students from all the level one groups. The data says how many students were there. How much did we collect? How many assignments did we give? And let me just try to paste it here. I don't know if I can do it, I'll just paste. You will be shocked to see that most of my students, I have 25 in the class. And out of 25 students, 23 have all finished their MyELT because they felt that teacher is going to give them five marks and which I did. I did give them five marks". (Interview B)

MyELT included online tasks that students had to complete after they finished the corresponding lessons in the textbook. Sheila used grades to motivate her students to do the tasks required of them and develop their English. She explained that they had a very low level of English and grades

were the only thing that her students were concerned with. Hence, she showed them that grades were given to those who were working hard. This technique helped to motivate her students. Table 11 illustrates part of the MyELT report with all the Level One groups in that semester that Sheila shared with me in the chat box in MS Teams. It can be noted that Sheila’s group had the highest number of students who completed MyELT tasks.

Table 11: MyELT Report for Level One

Name	Reading				Listening			
	Unit	Number of Exercises assigned	Number of Students who did 0 exercises	Number of students who completed all exercises	Unit	Number of Exercises assigned	Number of Students who did 0 exercises	Number of students who completed all exercises
Sheila	1-5	31	Nil	3	NA	NA	NA	NA
	NA	NA	NA	NA	1-5	20	Nil	7
	1-5	45	Nil	22	1-5	30	Nil	25
	1-5	41	Nil	11	1-5	42	Nil	Nil
	1-5	9	3	5	1-5	8	3	13
	1-5	30	Nil	6	1-5	22	1	7
	1-5	13	1	15	NA	NA	NA	NA
	1-5	39	Nil	19	1-5	30	Nil	14
	1-5	32	Nil	3	1-5	35	Nil	Nil
	NA	NA	NA	NA	1-5	24	1	11
	1-5	19	Nil	12	1-5	19	2	13
	1-5	15	Nil	17	1-5	12	5	5

Despite the positive effects of the PLC, those who were part of this community were faced with many difficulties, which are presented in the following section.

5.6 Challenges Faced

There are many challenges that the members believed affected their participation in the PLC. They included the workload of the members, time issues and technical issues. All of these issues are interrelated, as discussed in the following three sections.

5.6.1 Workload

Workload was perceived as one of the key obstacles that hindered the members from fully participating in the PLC. For instance, Emma explained her limited participation by saying, “I feel like there is certainly an invitation towards sharing responsibility, but some people like myself,

who are maybe a little bit overwhelmed, are taking more of a backseat” (Interview A). In both Interviews A and B, Emma stressed how tied up she was with other tasks. She said she was so busy that she could not even find time to chat with her colleagues who worked in the same office. She was working all the time to prepare for her classes.

Similarly, Sheila said collaboration in the PLC “did get affected because the kind of work we are doing, we were too involved into our work... It's not from eight to three we are teaching. It's like 24/7” (Interview B). Other members, such as Paul, agreed and stated that the online mode of teaching and learning and other requirements had caused the workload to double.

As highlighted in Section 5.4.1, Steven elucidated how stressed he was during the day. He mentioned that the workload and tasks he had to finish limited his participation in the PLC to some extent. It is worth noting that most members of the PLC had a full teaching load of 18 hours per week. Some members had other responsibilities such as being coordinators for committees. Therefore, they were given lighter teaching loads so they could perform those tasks. With a full teaching load, teachers had at least four hours of teaching per day and spent the rest of the time doing other tasks such as marking, preparing for classes and attending meetings. Consequently, teachers had little time to do other things such as taking part in the PLC and attending the meetings because online teaching took a lot of their time. Thus, in order to overcome this challenge, Paul said, “certain relaxations will have to be introduced if the same thing continues for a long time now” (Interview B).

5.6.2 Time Issues

Another constraint was time, which is strongly linked to workload. Some members, such as Paul and Sally, had back-to-back classes from 8 am to 12 pm before the PLC meeting. However, Sally said she did not experience a lot of stress because she could manage her time well and prepare for the meetings. In the last meeting, Paul said, “I really like it because it is really good for our professional growth, but even for that we need time to think. We need time to digest. We need time to think, but that is precisely what we don't have” (Week 11 Meeting). If Paul had had more time, he would have worked more to benefit from the PLC.

Also, Emma had limited time to do other activities. She said, “I find that about 25% of my time is dedicated to teaching and about 75% of my time is dedicated to administration” (Interview A). With the online mode of teaching and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers do not find time for professional learning and growth. This is because there are “too many documents at the end of the day to be submitted” (Sheila, Interview B). Therefore, Sheila said, “If we can have this time that is only for PLC and all the group has to work together for the PLC, I think that would bring wonderful results” (Interview B). She thought that if the members had time, they would work as a group, achieve more and learn more from the PLC. To overcome the issue of time, Mary suggested shifting the PLC meetings to weekends as the members would have more free time. However, she said this suggestion would need commitment and agreement from all the members to dedicate some of their free time to the PLC.

5.6.3 Technical Issues

Another challenge was related to the online mode of teaching and concerned the technical issues that the members experienced. Sally said that because of online teaching, which they were not used to, and the technical challenges they had to deal with, there was not much sharing and collective responsibility in the PLC. She said,

I think mainly it's [limited participation] because of that, because the online teaching and the workload and everything you can feel it even in the in the office where people just feel so demotivated to do a lot of things. (Interview B)

Sally perceived online teaching and the challenges that accompanied it as demotivating because teachers did not want to do a lot of tasks at the same time. Also, online teaching consumed more time and effort than face-to-face teaching. It was observed that towards the end of the semester and the last weeks of the PLC, there was more communication among the members. Some members shared their practices and reflections outside the meetings by posting on MS Teams, but this remained limited.

Moreover, during PLC meetings, there were some technical issues that affected the quality of the recordings. For instance, in the Week 2 Meeting, members’ voices got mixed up and it was not clear what they were saying. Another problem was that while one member was talking, his voice

was cut and he did not realise it although the members and I were trying to talk to him and draw his attention to the issue. It took some time to fix this issue and get things settled during the meeting. Furthermore, in most of the meetings, some members were unable to share their screens or open the camera because their devices did not support these functions. Another reason for this was that they had a weak network signal. To ensure that they were able to attend the meeting, they switched off their cameras and only used the microphone to participate and share their experiences.

5.7 Evaluating the PLC

One of the stages of this action research is evaluating the whole PLC. Evaluation is done twice, in the middle of the PLC and at the end of it. The first evaluation is done by the members during their first interviews (Interview A). The purpose of this evaluation is to modify and make changes to make the PLC better work. Members' suggestions are taken into account and they are shared with them in the next meeting after the midterm exams. The second evaluation is done at the end of the semester to give the members space to judge their participation and the mechanism of the PLC as a whole. This is done in Interview B and Week 11 Meeting. The final evaluation aims to rethink the PLC and modify it. Overall, the members welcome the establishment of the PLC in their target institution. They believe that with some changes, it can be successful and sustainable and can involve all the staff in the institution.

When planning the PLC, I decided to use Guskey's (2014) framework (see Chapter 3) for many reasons. This framework is comprehensive and consists of five levels of evaluation that I referred to when planning and evaluating the PLC. These levels enable the members to evaluate the PLC as a whole or in parts and make the evaluation not the last phase in the PLC. It makes the evaluation a cyclical process, allowing for modifications and improvements. The five levels of evaluation in Guskey's framework are:

- Members' reactions
- Members' learning
- Organizational support and change
- Members' use of new knowledge and skills
- Student learning outcome

During the interviews and PLC meetings, the members evaluate the PLC according to each of these levels. Some of the interview questions focus on these levels of evaluation, and some are derived from the characteristics of Bolam et al. (2005). Also, when the members reflect on their experience of the PLC as a whole, they use one or more levels to address what works and what needs to be improved. More details about each level of evaluation are provided below. These five levels of evaluation are strongly interlinked and influence one another.

5.7.1 Members' Reactions

This level addresses the members' experiences and their reactions to the physical setting of the PLC. In the present study, the PLC is conducted online using software that is approved by the institution and is used for online teaching. Although the members faced difficulties when using MS Teams for the first time, they were provided with training by SDC on how to use it. At the time of conducting this research, the members had no technical issues with the platform. In one or two meetings, there was a technical issue related to the sound; this was quickly solved, and the meeting continued with no issues. The PLC meeting is the only time when all the members are free. In the target institution, there is a two-hour slot during which no classes are held. This slot is allocated for extracurricular activities. One hour has been allocated for the PLC every two weeks, except for exam weeks, when no PLC meetings are held.

Overall, the members' experience of the PLC is positive. All the members highlight the usefulness of this community and point out that they have learnt a lot from it. They point out that the articles used for each area of the PLC are beneficial and make them think about their current practices. Also, several members explain that they benefit from the good practices of other members and that they try them with their students. For example, Sally used the crossword puzzles posted in MS Teams by another member and found them useful in her students.

As mentioned above, at times, some members participate very little and remain silent most of the time during the PLC meetings. One of the reasons is the heavy workload that hinders them from participating fully in the meetings and on MS Teams. Also, the workload and limited free time the members have resulted in not being able to read articles before meetings. Otherwise, the members

indicate that the PLC is a good learning experience that takes place in a friendly and supportive environment. This is addressed in the next evaluation level.

5.7.2 Members' Learning

Members' learning is the core of the PLC, which aims to bolster students' learning. The members indicate that they develop their learning skills through the PLC's discussions and reflections. In addition, members, such as Sheila and Noora, express an interest in action research. According to Sheila, the PLC makes her want to be up-to-date and focus on research and professional self-development.

In addition to the personal goals above, the members highlight many benefits of the PLC (see Section 5.5). One of them is being aware of the other levels in the target institutions and the challenges teachers face at each level. This knowledge makes the members ready to teach other levels and equips them with techniques and ideas they can use to help the students learn in a better way. These techniques and ideas are derived from the members' daily classroom practices and the articles they read on each area of the PLC. For example, in one meeting, Noora explains her method of using examples and tasks from the students' local culture to pique their interest in the lesson, and she finds it useful. Sheila and Robert then try this technique with success in their classes. Another example is peer teaching. Sheila tries this kind of teaching with the help of first-rate students in her class because she teaches a low level and her students are weak in English. She discovers that students' understanding of her classes has improved, and with the help of these first-rate students, she advances her teaching methods. After learning of Sheila's practice, Robert adds peer teaching to his class, and his students benefit from it.

There are other benefits the members highlight in their interviews. For instance, Sarah and Steven become more aware of how to give feedback in written work. They both assert that the discussions and the readings widen their thinking and broaden their knowledge. Now, they know when to use direct or indirect feedback and when to mix them so that their students learn from their mistakes. Moreover, when the members discuss motivation and autonomous learning, they challenge their perspectives of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and compare them to the literature. The meeting in question sees considerable discussion and argument of what motivation to focus on and how to

benefit the students more by considering their backgrounds, their perceptions of education and their levels of English. During these discussions, Mary, Paul and Sheila point out how they try to motivate their students from day one and reflect on what has worked well for them.

5.7.3 Organizational Support and Change

This level is of crucial importance when evaluating the PLC. It focuses on the support provided by the institution to the changes that occur at an individual level and on whether the required resources for the PLC are available. As highlighted in Chapter 4, I created a PLC in the target institution for the first time. It has eight members and lasts for one semester. I was supported by the administration team in setting up an active account in MS Teams and solving the technical issues that arose when creating the PLC in MS Teams. The head of the English Language Centre also supported the research by exempting the members from any meetings, tasks, and activities during the conduct of the PLC sessions.

This institutional support made sure that the PLC could be established and the meetings could take place on time. However, the members indicate that more support is needed from the administration in terms of their workloads. As explained in Chapter 5, the workloads and full schedules of the members hinder their full participation in the PLC. Mary, for example, suggests changing the timing of the PLC meetings and moving them to weekends. However, this suggestion requires the members' willingness to work on weekends.

Also, in the last two meetings, Paul addresses a very important point. That is the administration's policies and decisions that the members cannot change. One of these is the marking symbols and criteria. Participating in the PLC creates a learning opportunity for the members to focus on a specific area and learn more about it. This opportunity includes becoming acquainted with current research and linking theory and teaching practices. After focusing on error correction, some members argue that some changes should be made to the marking symbols and criteria used in the institution. When the administrative staff become part of the PLC, or when they open the door to suggestions and they take them into account, the members will be encouraged to become more active and take more responsibility for collective learning and improvement. This study, therefore, argues for having managerial support not only in terms of the physical resources needed for

establishing the PLC, but also in acknowledging members' learning and recognizing the changes that occur after this collective experience.

5.7.4 Members' Use of New Knowledge and Skills

This level of evaluation is related to the previous three levels. Its focuses on the new ideas and skills that the members learn and their progress in the PLC. Since progress is gradual, this study examines it twice, in the middle of the semester and at the end, using interviews. In Interviews A and B, the members discuss how they have developed their learning skills through discussions, readings and reflections. They also address the practices they have tried with their students after the PLC meetings.

Since the members selected the areas of the PLC, they have the motivation to learn more and focus on them. For this reason, the members indicate that they try to put all other tasks to one side during the meeting time and attend the meeting. In their interviews, Emma, Sally and Mary highlight that in each meeting, there is always something to learn, and that this has encouraged them to attend the meetings. The members note that they implement the good practices of other members to support their students' learning. Some examples of these practices have been mentioned earlier in this section. Some of them are peer teaching and using tasks related to the local culture of the students.

5.7.5 Student Learning Outcome

This level deals with the key aspect of the present study. The PLC is implemented to assist the members in professional learning so that they can help their students to progress and learn more. In the PLC, no exams have been done to determine students' achievements and measure their progress. This is because the members teach students at different levels, and each level has its own performance criteria. For this reason, comparisons in their performance cannot be made, and conducting exams may not provide the desired information about students' learning. Thus, the interviews focus on what the teachers notice in their classes.

The members who have tried new practices in their classes are more able to reflect on the progress of their students than the other members. For example, Steven does not try a new practice mentioned in the PLC. So, when asked in his interview, whether the PLC has influenced his

practices and the performance of his students, he finds it difficult to answer. This is because he does not know whether their progress is as a result of his participation in the PLC or not. On the other hand, Robert clearly highlights that his students' can understand better and pay more attention when he uses tasks related to their lives and backgrounds.

Exams are not the only means to verify and address students' learning outcomes. Noora and Sheila notice improvement not only in learning English but also in students' behavioural and affective domains. Sheila, for instance, says that her students' motivation to learn and do extra tasks increases when she uses grades to pique their interest in class. Noora points out that she tries to strengthen students' confidence by focusing on one mistake to explain and correct in their written work, rather than focusing on all the mistakes. This has led her students to be more committed and attend all the classes, even those classes that are reserved for weak students. The same thing happens in Sheila's classes as well. Guskey (2014) mentions that affective and behavioural domains can also be used to measure students' learning and performance.

It is worth mentioning her a significant point raised by Noora in her Interview A, which was already noted in Chapter 5; that is the attitude of students towards education. This issue is linked to the arguments raised by many researchers. For example, students' negative perceptions of education and their misconceptions about relying entirely on teachers can be dealt with by involving the society in achieving the goal of the PLC. Given the influence of the society on the ideas and attitudes of its members, including students, Huffman et al. (2016) and Louis and Marks (1998) argue for social support and highlight its impact on students' high achievements. Since student learning is the core aim of the PLC, involving other stakeholders such as the society can assist the PLC members in attaining their goals and inform society of the students' performance and outcomes.

5.8 Ideas for improvement to Create a Sustainable PLC

After having first-hand experience with a PLC, the members suggested many ideas to consider if a PLC were implemented again, to ensure that it would be sustainable. These ideas appear in the following sections.

5.8.1 Managerial Support

As highlighted above, the members faced several challenges, one of which was workload. In addition to teaching, teachers must complete many administrative tasks. Emma said, “I find that about 25% of my time is dedicated to teaching and about 75% of my time is dedicated to administration” (Interview A). The online mode of teaching and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic prevented teachers from finding time for professional learning and growth—there are “too many documents at the end of the day to be submitted” (Sheila, Interview B).

To overcome this challenge, Paul said that “certain relaxations will have to be introduced if the same thing continues for a long time now” (Interview B). He suggested introducing relaxation by reducing the administrative tasks that teachers must complete, to encourage them to focus on developing themselves professionally in their free time. He also suggested some policy changes, such as those concerning marking symbols and criteria, using them only when the student fully understands what they mean.

5.8.2 Going Deep in Professional Learning

Instead of focusing on many areas of professional learning in one semester, Paul suggested, “We could have gone deeper because we have the potential and experience to go deeper than this” (Interview B). As Section 5.4.3 discusses, Paul perceived the current PLC as broadening the members’ knowledge of spotlighted areas. Another approach, he said, would be to focus on one area per semester. Concentrating on one area for a significant amount of time would enable the members to dig into it as deeply as possible.

5.8.3 Having More Members of the PLC

Increasing the number of members in the PLC was another suggestion. Robert said, “If more members, more people are enrolled, I mean, join the community, then we will have more ideas . . . And that will be a learning platform. I mean, we can enrich our knowledge at a greater scale” (Interview B). Having more members means having more ideas to share and various experiences on which to reflect.

5.8.4 Being More Active

For the PLC to be more rewarding, Sally thought that all members should be active in it. A “PLC is about learning from each other, but if I'm the one who's active or only one or two people who are active, it's really hard to learn from each other when there's nothing much to learn from” (Sally, Interview B). As previously indicated, some members tended to be silent for most of the meetings. A few members noticeably dominated the meetings because other members preferred to listen or type their ideas rather than speak. However, when all members take the initiative to speak and share their perceptions, others will know what they are thinking and interact more with them.

5.8.5 Assigning a Team Leader

Another idea that Sally (Interview B) suggested for a sustainable PLC was to have a team leader who would arrange the tasks and meetings and follow up to see if they were achieved. She also indicated that for the team to succeed, the members must be willing to work with the leader and share their ideas and experiences. She stressed the idea of willingness to share because she believed that there is “a bit of a culture in the department where people do keep their practices to themselves sometimes. And that doesn't help with the PLC . . . learning development” (Interview B). To change this culture, members must value sharing and perceive the advantage of working with others.

Sally pointed out that creating an active team with a leader would be important in a workplace with this culture:

[P]eople don't tend to share because they feel like they know what they're doing or they're comfortable with their own way of teaching methods that they don't feel like they want to improve. It's a bizarre culture that I've encountered so far, but it has been there for quite a while according to some people. So to break that culture is a bit hard. And it's also I think because maybe some people fear that their way of teaching might be judged perhaps. (Interview B)

Fear of being criticised or underestimated was not present in the PLC, as the members highlighted. So, creating a PLC team with a leader to organise the tasks in the community would help develop trust in the workplace and respect among the staff.

5.8.6 Building a Positive Environment

This idea intertwines with the previous idea. A positive environment helps teachers share and reflect on their practices. Steven asserted this idea; he believed that one could create a positive environment “by creating an atmosphere of collaboration, trust and openness. And by doing that, then you're going to have a very fruitful, easy time with PLC sort of work” (Interview B). Having a positive environment in a PLC contributes to positive results.

5.9 Summary and Conclusion

This chapter presented the key findings of the present study. It started by pointing out members’ perceptions of teaching and learning and the reasons that motivated them to take part in the study. Then, it highlighted members’ experiences in the PLC. The chapter elucidated the benefits the members perceived and the challenges they faced. Finally, an evaluation of the PLC using Guskey’s (2014) model led to presenting ideas that the members highlighted for creating a sustainable PLC.

Overall, as the beginning of the chapter notes, the typical characteristics of Bolam et al. (2005) inform the study design. The study’s findings spotlighted the member experiences that show some of those characteristics were present, while some were not in the present PLC. Table 12 illustrates them.

Table 12: Presence of the Characteristics of Bolam et al. (2005) in the Present Study

Typical Characteristics of Bolam et al. (2005)	Presence of the Characteristics of Bolam et al. (2005) in the Present Study
1. Shared Values and Vision	The members had similar values, beliefs and perceptions of the teaching and learning approaches (see Section 5.2)
2. Collective Responsibility for Students’ Learning	Limited shared responsibility during meetings and via sharing few posts outside meeting timings.
3. Collaboration Focused on Learning	Collaboration was limited to meeting discussions and some corridor chats (see Section 5.4.1)
4. Individual and Collective Professional Learning	It was via and focusing on the interests of the members (see Section 5.4.3) and sharing and adapting new practices (see Section 5.5)

5. Reflective Personal Inquiry	There was reflection on personal experiences through meetings and by adapting other practices and finding out whether they worked in the members' classes (see Section 5.5)
6. Openness, Networks, and Partnerships	The members were open to share (see Sections 5.4.1 and 5.4.2). No networks or partnerships were formed.
7. Inclusive Membership	The PLC had only a small sample of teachers as it was created for the first time.
8. Mutual Trust, Respect and Support	Respect, trust and support were there in the positive atmosphere of the PLC (see Section 5.4.2)

Table 12 shows that most of Bolam et al.'s (2005) characteristics were found in the present study. However, the second and third characteristic were limited to sharing and supporting each other to learn to overcome their difficulties during the meeting timings. Very limited posts were shared outside meeting timings. Also, the members were open to share practices and reflections with each other. However, there were no networks and partnerships formed with other staff in the same institution or other institutions because it was implemented for the first time and was run for one semester. The other characteristics were there in the present PLC. The next chapter will discuss these findings and highlight the characteristics present in the PLC along with the pertinent literature.

Chapter 6: Discussion of the Findings

6.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the key findings presented in Chapter 5 and relates them to the existing literature. To reiterate, this study aims to explore the PLC members' perceptions and experiences of taking part in the learning community. It also seeks to understand their reflections and viewpoints on how to make a sustainable and successful PLC in order to make suggestions for stakeholders regarding staff professional learning, as well as inform their decisions concerning students' learning. After the PLC was created, data were collected using three main tools: preliminary documentary analysis, interviews and meeting observations.

This chapter first discusses the PLC members' perceptions of the teaching and learning process and highlights their professional growth needs. Then, it addresses the positive environment of the PLC and discusses the collaboration that focuses on members' learning follows. It illustrates the members' daily classroom practices and reflections, stressing the link between theory and members' daily practices. Finally, based on the experiences of the members and pertinent literature, the last part of this chapter discusses how to develop a successful and sustainable PLC. To this end, this chapter discusses the key themes, based on the main findings that Chapter 5 presents and corresponding to the two research questions. Sections 6.2 through 6.7 relate to the first research question, discussing members' experiences of the PLC. Section 6.8 deals with the second research question on making the PLC more successful and sustainable.

6.2 Perceptions of the Teaching and Learning Process

The findings of this study show that the perceptions of the members concerning the teaching and learning process confirm the core vision of the PLC in the pertinent literature. This section reflects on the members' key opinions and how they support the goal of the PLC.

As mentioned in Chapter 5, the results indicate that the members of the PLC tend to be guiding and approachable teachers. Emma highlights that she guides the students by asking them questions and demanding that they do most of the work. She also clearly asserts that her classes are student-

centred. Other members, such as Paul and Steven, emphasise that they are approachable and are available for their students when they need assistance in overcoming any difficulties they face.

In addition, members such as Sheila and Mary point out that the school system does not pay attention to students' motivation and willingness to learn. Sheila and other members believe that it is their responsibility to boost students' learning in every possible way. This is the key goal of the PLC, which motivated the majority of its members to take part in the present study. After conducting the introductory meeting that explained that the aim of PLC is to bolster members' professional learning skills for the sake of enhancing students' learning, all the attendees welcomed participation in it. However, four of them withdrew towards the end of the study.

As there was a match between their perceptions of teaching and learning and the purpose of the PLC, the members were eager to participate. Teachers' perceptions of the process of teaching and learning are identified as one of the characteristics that influence teachers' decisions to take part in a PLC (Brownell et al., 2006). In their study, Brownell et al. (2006) stress that teachers' perceptions are significant because they impact their willingness to contribute to collective learning and development. The study strongly supports these findings. The members' view of the importance of the PLC and collective learning is evident in 1) their willingness to participate in the PLC, 2) their perceptions of their roles as guiding, supportive, and facilitating teachers, and 3) their views that the class should support student learning and be student-centred. The members' eagerness to learn is illustrated in the present study by their regular attendance of the meetings despite having tight schedules and also by their readiness to share their classroom practices and perceptions with each other. More details on this sharing are discussed in the sections below. Overall, although they expressed them in different ways, the members had almost the same perceptions, which are rooted in their readiness to meet the needs of the students and provide them with the best learning atmosphere. This involves encouraging them to take responsibility for learning and believing in their abilities to achieve more. These perceptions support the establishment of the PLC. According to Olivier and Huffman (2016), meeting students' needs and creating an optimal learning environment and learning opportunities are the foundation of a PLC. The member' perceptions in this study facilitate and confirm the authors' view.

Furthermore, the members were asked to identify the areas they wanted to focus on in their professional learning, they selected four areas as mentioned in the previous chapter. These areas shed light on what the members believe regarding the teaching and learning process. Developing critical thinking skills, increasing intrinsic motivation, fostering learner autonomy and giving feedback in written work are all areas that are of important concern of the members. Improving these areas can help students maximize their learning abilities and develop their skills to study independently. In other words, these four areas indicate that the members want to focus on the quality of teaching and what their students can obtain from their classes, rather than focusing on teaching methods. Therefore, these findings corroborate the studies of several researchers such as Cowen (2010) and Dufour (2004), who highlight that focusing on improving the quality of teaching is vital in boosting students' learning. These results convey the professional needs of the members when they joined the PLC, and these needs are discussed in the following section.

6.3 Professional Growth Needs

As highlighted above and in the previous chapters, professional learning is the basis of the PLC. The results of this study support those of many who have documented staff learning in a PLC. This issue is examined in the following paragraphs.

Promoting the PD of staff is one of the key areas of attention in the target institution, as testified by the presence of a committee for professional development for the whole institution and another committee in the ELC called the Staff Development Committee (SDC), to ensure the provision of various PD activities. The SDC reports show that each year, a number of workshops and presentations are organized for staff with the participation of external and internal presenters. Additionally, staff are required to fill out a survey after each event, this includes a Likert scale, and the results are reported to show how satisfied staff were with each event. The results are found in the committee reports. As stated in Chapter 5, to ensure the promotion of staff learning, teachers are asked to submit their appraisals with their preferred areas for development. The SDC uses this list when planning its activities for the next academic year.

The actions taken by the target institution reveal the importance given to staff professional development. Although the SDC might be aware of staff preferences for PD, staff may discover

that none of their preferences is in the SDC's action plan due to factors such as the large number of staff in the target institution and time constraints, which make it hard to address the needs of every single member of staff. Hence, a PLC ensures that the needs of its members are spotlighted. This was the reason why some members (e.g., Noora) were eager to take part in the study and participate in the PLC. In other words, even though both the SDC and the PLC aim to promote staff learning, the small community of the PLC provides a greater opportunity to fulfil the needs of all its members compared to the general PD programme run for the whole institution. This is because, in this study, the PLC is founded on the pre-specified needs of its members, who have agreed to attend the PLC meetings because each of the PLC's areas is directly related to their interests and needs. This evidence is in line with the arguments asserted in the PLC literature. For instance, in their project in the UK, Bolam et al. (2005) and Stoll et al. (2006) investigated 16 schools and found that identifying the needs of teachers when establishing a PLC provides more opportunities for collective learning and support.

Except for Noora, who views PD sessions as not appropriate for her needs, the other members have a positive view of the PD events run at the departmental and university levels. As stated in Chapter 5, the members perceive the PD events as a learning experience. Their views of these events indicate that the position of teachers is not limited to the direct needs of their students in specific classes. Staff must have knowledge of other fields related to teaching, such as quality assurance and educational technology. The SDC reports contain a variety of sessions organized for teachers. The results of this study show that the division made in the pertinent literature between 'professional development' and 'professional learning' (see Chapter 3) might be misplaced. The same is true of the negative connotation associated with the former (e.g., Borko, 2004; Easton, 2008; Fullan, 2007; Vangrieken et al., 2015) and the positive one associated with the latter (e.g., Abbott et al., 2018; Hipp & Huffman, 2003; Trilaksono et al., 2019). The argument in favour of using the term 'professional learning' is tempting and supports the core of this research (i.e., the PLCs). However, the members' opinions and the SDC reports show that regardless of whether professional development and learning activities are arranged by a committee or through a PLC, they all lead to professional growth and they complement each other in terms of the goals set for each activity. Leaving names aside (PD, PLC), what matters is the aim of teachers' professional growth and students' improvement and, more importantly, the extent to which

teachers (and their students) benefit from the sessions. It is worth noting that the title of this section uses the term 'professional growth' to reflect the fact that both PD and PLC, as far as the goal of improving teachers' learning is clear and the activities are thus planned to serve this purpose.

Furthermore, as mentioned in Section 6.2, the topics selected to be the focus of the PLC demonstrate the concern of the members for addressing the quality of teaching and learning. They share the vision of the education process that leads students to learn. When looking back at the areas discussed in the PLC, it is evident that these four areas in question are all linked. They revolve around how students think (critical thinking skills), their learning readiness (motivation and learner autonomy) and learning difficulties (error correction in written work). These topics are similar to the ones teachers discussed in the study by Sawyer and Rimm-Kaufman (2007). In their study, the teachers discussed topics related to learning difficulties and other issues, such as classroom discipline and the curriculum. The results of the present study support Sawyer and Rimm-Kaufman's (2007) suggestion that students' learning can be discussed and expanded beyond numbers and test results, which are often the main focus of many researchers (e.g., Dufour, 2004; Strahan, 2003). This does not mean that information derived from test data should be underestimated. I argue for using test data along with other indicators teachers verify in their classes, to boost student learning. In the present study, no achievement results were shared. The reasons for this were many. First, this was the first time the members experienced a PLC and how it works. Second, the members were from different levels, which made it complicated to compare the results across other levels. In principle, sharing achievement results can enrich the discussions and highlights what works and what needs to be improved in classroom practices. It can also give an indication of what students have learnt and what skills they need to develop to learn more effectively.

The findings also reveal that the members gained many benefits from participating in the PLC and addressing the four areas highlighted above. For example, they became acquainted with the other levels and the challenges teachers face at each level. Moreover, they improved their learning skills by reading more articles, reflections and group discussions. Some of the members explained that they changed their classroom practices after the PLC discussions. Furthermore, most of them appreciated the PD sessions arranged at the college and departmental level because these events

helped them to expand their knowledge in areas related to the education process such as using educational software and quality assurance. Overall, the positive viewpoints and learning experiences of the members in the present study corroborate the findings from many other contexts. For example, in Singapore, Chauraya and Brodie (2018) report that teachers find conversations and discussions in the PLC a good opportunity as they can share classroom practices and learn new ones. Teachers also find that the PLC helps deepen their knowledge of the topics they discuss, which the present study confirms. Furthermore, Zhang and Pang (2016) note that Chinese teachers highly value collaboration and sharing activities in a PLC. The findings of this study indicate that in addition to recognizing the benefits of the PLC, all the members, except one, are happy with the PD sessions organized at the university and department levels. They are very positive about them and perceived them as a learning opportunity to know and find out about other aspects of education, regardless of whether they are directly related to their classroom experiences. This study, therefore, supports having a PD programme. The staff satisfaction reports emphasize the positive view of teachers towards PD. However, the members also say that they want a PLC where they can closely and directly discuss their thoughts and support one another. So, the PLC is not a replacement for PD, but a complement to it. PD programmes and PLCs need to be in line with each other to maximize teachers' learning and professional growth.

6.4 A Positive PLC Environment

As highlighted in Chapter 3, a positive environment is a fundamental aspect of the PLC. The findings of this study show that the members can sense a friendly atmosphere in the PLC. This is in line with many studies done in other contexts. For example, in Finland, Antinluoma et al. (2018) stress that having positive collegial relationships helps to have a supportive culture of professional learning. A culture of collegiality and trust was present in all the PLCs examined in Antinluoma et al.'s study, which is one of the most comprehensive and large-scale investigations of PLCs, because it covers 13 schools over three years. Its findings not only support the present study regarding the influence and presence of a positive culture in PLCs. Another shared result concerned the challenges the participants face in a PLC. Both studies report that although the PLC environment encourages learning, participants are hindered by time constraints because their daily schedules are full that they cannot fully take advantage of the PLC.

Similar results came from an American study by Hipp and Huffman (2007) and in an Indonesian one by Trilaksono et al. (2019). In the former study, the researchers created many PLCs in different schools and involved the participants in the last stage to assess them. They found that a positive environment is significant setting up and sustaining a PLC. Moreover, creating a positive culture of sharing and collaboration contributes to the success of the PLC. However, the nature of Trilaksono et al.'s (2019) study is slightly different from the present study because the researchers involved both teachers and leaders in the PLC. When power distance between the two groups is removed, the PLCs where the leaders manage to collaborate with the other teachers are more successful because there is a positive environment and culture that facilitate working and learning collectively. These findings support the present study and highlight the role of a positive environment in building good relationships among members and sharing practices and learning new ones together.

Moreover, in the present study, the members of the PLC emphasize that having a positive environment is a vital element for the establishment and sustainability of the PLC. As stated above, such an environment assists the members in being open and trusting and respecting each other. This positive culture of openness and sharing is not present in the target institution, as highlighted by Sally in her Interview B. This indicates that a lot needs to be done to change this culture. In other contexts, the culture of sharing and openness is already present, making it easier to create PLCs. For instance, Chen et al. (2016) report that Chinese culture has a significant impact on teachers' attitudes towards PLCs. Chinese culture is collective, which means that teachers appreciate collective work and sharing. This type of culture contradicts with the one found in the target institution in the present study, where teachers tend to keep their experiences to themselves. For this reason, for a PLC to succeed and be sustainable, a supportive environment and a culture of openness are required (Chen et al., 2016). This is especially the case in a context such as the target institution, where a culture of openness, sharing, and trust is not being fostered. In the PLC meetings, openness and sharing were apparent. However, if the PLC is to be created for the whole institution and with larger groups of members, then working on creating a supportive environment will be necessary.

6.5 Collaboration Focused on Members' Learning

The term “PLC” denotes the notion of sharing and collective responsibility among the community members. However, the findings suggest a limited collaboration. The members were made aware of this requirement and their expected roles during an introductory meeting, they were also sent relevant documents (e.g., action plan, timetable) prior to the start of the PLC. For instance, in the timetable (see Appendix 10) and the PLC plan shared with the members prior to the start of the PLC (see Appendix 11), it was indicated that the members were expected and encouraged to share reflections, experiences and resources relevant to the PLC areas not only during the meetings. They were expected to share posts, reflections and resources on MS Teams outside the meetings as well. They were thus supposed to share responsibility and work collaboratively to achieve their goal of bolstering students' learning. However, in this study, the members are active only during meetings. The MS Teams platform is used very little for chats and discussions outside the meetings. Therefore, during the PLC, tasks and responsibilities are not shared or performed. The following paragraphs basically highlight collaboration during and outside meetings, e.g., corridor chats. The former is referred to as formal collaboration and the latter is referred to as informal collaboration. This division is derived from the study of Avalos-Bevan and Bascopé (2017) who found similar forms of collaboration, though the two studies reveal different findings.

6.5.1 Formal Collaboration

In this study, there are regular meetings held every two or three weeks, depending on exam weeks. They are formal because I organize them and are recorded. They form the main source of learning in the study. The members show that they are concerned with how they help their students learn more effectively rather than with what to teach them. They share their experiences, for example, of how to motivate students and spark their interest in learning and how to develop their critical thinking skills. During the meetings, the members reflect and share what they think may be helpful for others. So, the focus on quality is present. However, collective responsibility and collaboration are very limited. Working collectively with other members in order to achieve a desired goal is a significant feature of a PLC (Bolam et al., 2005; Dufour, 2004; Stoll et al., 2006; Wenger, 1998). This feature is scarcely present in the PLC in question.

During the PLC meetings, the only form of collaboration is the sharing of classroom practices and the group reflections on them. As mentioned earlier, no student data are shared. Outside the meetings, one member has shared a website she uses with her students to create crossword puzzles, which her students find useful to overcome spelling errors. Sharing educational resources and materials can be helpful and increases collaboration among members (Antinluoma et al., 2018; Louise Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, et al., 2006). The limited and poor sharing of resources found in the present study differs from the PLC in Hong Kong studied by Pang et al. (2016). In their study, it is found that the participants share knowledge, practices and information, and this sharing results in nurturing a culture of mutual support among the participants. This sharing is also reported to develop collective responsibility towards students' needs. In the present study, the only sharing that happens at a satisfactory level is verbally sharing and reflecting on daily classroom practices. The overall poor sharing of practices seems to result in poor responsibility and collaboration towards achieving the goal of the PLC, that is enhancing students' learning.

It is worth noting that compared to the first half of the semester, the meetings of the second half show more enthusiastic discussing and sharing. In other words, the members start to share more ideas and practices, beyond simply talking about them. Some members, such as Sally take the initiative and make their sharing more interactive. An example of this is when Sally shares her screen to show other members how she gives feedback and corrects her students' written work and how her students work on her comments and produce the second drafts of their essays. Furthermore, Sally uses her background in technology to create a poll to find out whether the students learn better when the teacher uses direct or indirect feedback. This poll is an efficient visual illustration that accompanies the PLC meeting on error correction in written work. Most of the members have answered it immediately after the meeting. However, when questions are posted by me or other members, almost no answers are offered. This lack of interaction can be attributed to challenges such as the workload and time constraints discussed in Chapter 5. These challenges echo those reported by Lohman (2005) in the USA. Lohman uses the term 'informal workplace learning' for the PLCs he investigates. He also reports other challenges that are not reported and covered in the present study, such as fund issues, lack of materials needed for learning (e.g., computers) and the personality of some colleagues who are unwilling to participate in learning activities.

Furthermore, the practices shared by members (e.g., showing screenshots, adding posts, reflecting and commenting on shared classroom techniques) confirm the assumptions of Vescio et al. (2008) regarding PLCs. The first assumption is that knowledge is situated and developed in teachers' daily practices. The second one is that teachers' active engagement contributes to enhancing their professional learning and eventually their students' learning. The daily practices and reflections of this study's members are discussed more in Section 6.6. In general, interaction and collaboration in terms of sharing practices during the meetings provide a learning opportunity to all the members, as they explain in their interviews, even though they are limited. "Collaborative learning capacity is the most significant subscale that contributes to the PLC practice" (Pang et al., 2016, p. 241). In other words, if the amount of sharing is increased and many resources are shared, more benefits will be gained from the PLC.

6.5.2 Informal Collaboration

As mentioned above, collaboration is limited in the PLC, except for rich conversations during the meetings. However, some of the members engaged in a kind of informal collaboration—mostly chats—outside the meetings. These chats are not planned. They occur by coincidence when some members bump into each other in the corridor. During these short informal discussions, the members point out similarities and differences among their classes and other members' classes. They also reflect back on the points raised in the previous PLC meetings. These informal conversations can be considered as a form of PD (Borko, 2004; Thacker, 2017).

These corridor chats are similar to the behaviour of teachers in a study conducted by Avalos-Bevan and Bascopé (2017) in Chili. However, in their study, the researchers document collaboration and participants' positive view of it; this is the opposite of the findings for the target PLC. Like formal collaboration (PLC meetings), informal collaboration in the present study is limited since it happens by coincidence and only with some members. These informal chats are an opportunity for the members to learn and develop professionally. Some members such as Sheila, Paul, and Sally do not restrict themselves to the PLC meetings. They take the initiative and continue the discussions when they meet other members in the corridor. For example, when Sally thinks someone has raised something interesting in the meeting, she goes to that member after the meeting

to discuss it further. So, corridor chats can be considered as a form of individual and group learning in this study. This is because these members take whatever opportunity they have to talk about what was discussed in the meetings. The fact that these members keep thinking about the issues and want to discuss them further illustrates the significance and influence of the PLC meetings.

However, some members, such as Steven, Emma and Sheila, say that because of their workloads, they do not find time to chat with and meet other members outside the meetings. Their words highlight one of the key difficulties members face when taking part in the PLC, that is their teaching loads. The findings reflect the vital role of time in the success of a PLC. When planning a PLC, time should be considered a key factor to ensure that the members can fully participate in the PLC and learn from it. Many researchers refer to time as one of the most important resources required for establishing this type of community. For instance, Hord (1997) and Hord and Sommers (2008) suggest that time is one of the factors needed to support professional and collective learning. Furthermore, Bolam et al. (2005) and Stoll et al. (2006) argue that the development of a PLC can be hindered if resources such as time are in short supply.

Time has a great role in sharing responsibility and collaboration. When time is unavailable, members can hardly work together and support each other in collective learning. The members in this study do not have a great influence over their timetables. This, therefore, is a crucial point that policy-makers and administrative staff should consider when the PLC is to be created. However, the members can influence how a PLC works to ensure that collaboration is present. This is discussed in the following section.

6.5.3 Assigning Tasks in the PLC

Assigning tasks is a suggestion made by some members of the PLC for the purpose of increasing collaboration and sharing responsibility that are limited in this study. For example, Sally recommends having a team leader who can make sure that every member performs their responsibilities. The leader should assign tasks, check that they are completed and schedule meetings. The PLC in the present study does not have a leader. However, the members were assigned some tasks to do in the PLC plan (see Appendix 11). They are asked to read articles, write

posts, share information, reflect on it, and participate in the meetings' discussions. However, these tasks are not carried out due to the various reasons mentioned in this chapter and Chapter 5.

Sharing tasks ensures having collective responsibility towards professional learning and students' learning. Because the members have other tasks and responsibilities, their roles in the PLC can be shifted, including leadership that can be shifted or shared. When the members have specific tasks to carry out, their commitment to the PLC may be increased. Additionally, this may help the members overcome the challenge of active participation. As explained above, it is observed that some members tend to be more active during meetings than others. They talk more and share more of their classroom practices and reflections. Members, such as Sally and Steven, notice this. In their interviews, they say that they do not want to take over the PLC by speaking more, but they find themselves in a position where they need to speak and carry the conversations to interrupt the silence. This is because other members tend to be quiet most of the time and do not take the initiative to talk. So, assigning tasks to each member can generate equal responsibility for group learning (Murphy & Lick, 2005) and may help the members to collaborate, interact and contribute equally to the PLC. In their research, Bolam et al. (2005) and Stoll et al. (2006) assert that having collective responsibility for boosting students' learning is a significant characteristic of PLCs because it guarantees that no member has more pressure than others; this contributes to the success of the PLC. Shifting responsibilities and assigning tasks to each member seems to be a practical step towards overcoming some of the weaknesses pointed out when evaluating the present PLC (see Section 6.8).

6.6 Daily Classroom Practices and Reflections

Daily classroom practices are the basis of discussions in the PLC. The members share their classroom experiences, especially the successful ones, but also the challenges they face with their students. By sharing these practices, the members improve their understanding of their students and obtain new ideas that help them learn and develop professionally. Based on the data from the meeting observations and the interviews, for example, the members benefit from the experience of Noora, who uses tasks related to the local culture. Some members, such as Robert, try to use reading tasks that are relevant to students' backgrounds. In addition, Steven uses advanced questioning techniques such as open questions and concept-checking questions to encourage his

students to think critically and use the language more. Furthermore, peer teaching is one of the practices Sheila uses with her students. Because her students' linguistic level is low, peer teaching is very helpful and encourages them to be active and motivated and to learn more.

The act of sharing practices during meetings is associated with reflection. When the members share their daily practices, they identify the good practices and reflect back on the challenges they face with the support of other group members. The findings reveal changes in members' practices as they reflect and apply new practices in their classrooms. This indicates the importance of reflective thinking in professional learning. Other researchers, such as Bandura (1986) and Hipp and Huffman (2007), argue that reflective thinking is vital for the sake of improving the members' own learning and their practices.

Moreover, as explained above, the four areas of the PLC are selected by the members, and are thus directly related to their interests and needs. One of these areas is error correction and how to give feedback in written work. During their meetings and interviews, Sally explains that the meetings help her to think about both ways (direct and indirect) of giving feedback, as a result, she is aware of how to give feedback to improve her students' written work. Steven decided to change his way of correcting students' written work by giving indirect feedback. The findings illustrate that sharing members' daily practices and reflecting on them gives them the opportunity of seeing their actions from a different angle, learn from one another, and improve their practices by being aware of the current practices. These results support those of Andrews and Lewis (2007), who find out that reflection develops teachers' practices and expands their knowledge.

In addition, this study shows that sharing daily practices and reflections and a positive atmosphere are intertwined. The members reflect on almost every point raised during meetings. When the members share their practices, they also explain why they did something in a certain way, thus challenging their own assumptions and prejudices. An example of this is the members' perceptions of their students and their abilities. When Robert, Noora and other members start linking their activities to the local culture, they notice that students become more engaged and motivated. The practices of these members make other members (e.g., Paul) change their views regarding only using tasks that are linked to global cultures. They thus start valuing the local culture of the students

more and using a mix of activities, as this helps their students to understand better the content and learn more. Challenging perceptions and reflections are found to develop reflective inquiry (Chauraya & Brodie, 2018). In addition to thinking about their daily practices, the members reflect on the articles they read before the meetings and relate them to their classroom practices. This aspect is discussed in the following section.

6.7 The Link Between Theory and Practice in the PLC

Prior to each meeting, one or more articles were sent to the members to read and reflect on. The members were asked to link the articles' target areas to their classroom practices. This was done to facilitate discussions and encourage the members to share their daily practices. This section discusses the findings related to the members' perceptions of using the literature to support the PLC meetings.

One of the recent studies that use scientific articles in such a way is the Canadian study of Abbott et al. (2018). This study investigates the effectiveness of PLCs in adult ESL programmes; in it, the researchers use articles that the participants enjoy reading to support the formation of the PLCs. The difference between their study and the study at hand is that in the former, the articles are selected by the participants. In this study, the articles are selected by me. Still, the members find them useful, which corroborate the findings of Abbott et al. (2018). Supporting meetings with pertinent literature is one of the positive features of the PLC underscored by the members.

Despite the lack of sharing of resources via MS Teams, it is noticed that the articles I shared have a great impact on the members' practices. The articles provide an opportunity for members to question their current practices and challenge them based on what they read. In other words, the members form a link between the theory they read about and what they actually do in their classes. In this process, when they discuss the target areas and form this link between theories or concepts and their practices, they develop collective learning and shared understandings of the target areas. The members' positive opinions about reading articles and the rich discussions they have as a result echo the findings of Barab et al. (2002) and Grossman et al. (2001), who stress the importance of connecting current practices to research in order to enhance professional learning.

The articles are a tool to enrich members' discussions, remain up-to-date with the current trends in their fields and expand their horizons of knowledge.

Another merit for reading research for the PLC meetings is that doing so expands the members' knowledge and makes them more aware of what they are doing in their classes. An example that is already mentioned in Chapter 5 is when the members discuss how to develop students' learning skills. In one of the articles the members read, the researchers highlight the circles of critical thinking. These circles are found in the members' practices, but they are not aware of the rationale behind them and what they are called in the literature. Reading scientific articles, therefore, provides an opportunity to learn and develop professionally. Many scholars argue for providing these opportunities to increase teacher effectiveness. For instance, Good and Weaver's (2003, p. 439) state that "... teachers must stay current in educational theory and practice. Thus, it seems to be a logical assumption that teachers must continue to learn about their craft and content, making quality professional development opportunities essential". This statement is in line with the findings of the present study.

6.8 How to Create a Sustainable PLC

As Chapter 5 shows, the members had first-hand experience with the PLC. Due to its first-time implementation, some aspects went well, and others required improvement. This section discusses how to create a successful and sustainable PLC based on pertinent literature and the results of the present study.

6.8.1 Support from the Management

An important step towards PLC sustainability is having support from the management of the institution, to avoid any challenges that could hinder members' participation in the PLC, such as workload. In the present study, teachers must complete many administrative tasks.

To overcome this challenge, Paul suggested introducing relaxation periods by reducing administrative tasks, so teachers can focus on developing themselves professionally in their free time. Also, he suggested changing some policies, such as those concerning marking symbols and criteria and using them only when the students fully understand what they mean. Ward and

Selveste (2012) support this suggestion, emphasising that reducing some administrative tasks to enable prioritising working in the PLC and attending its meetings is important for its success.

6.8.2 Deepening the Focus of the PLC

Based on the findings of this study, another area that requires addressing when creating a PLC is its focus. Instead of focusing on many areas of professional learning in one semester, Paul suggests going deeper into the PLC. Concentrating on one area for a significant amount of time would enable the members to dig into it as deeply as possible. Many studies on PLCs support this point, focusing on specific area(s) in PLCs. One of them is the study that Strahan (2003) conducted, which investigates a PLC created to focus on ways to improve North Carolina students' reading skills.

6.8.3 Increasing the Number of Members in the PLC

Increasing the number of PLC members is another suggestion that the present study's findings highlight. Robert argued that having more members results in sharing more ideas and various experiences on which to reflect. The participants in Engin and Atkinson's (2015) study considered the number of members a limitation, believing that having more members can contribute to PLC effectiveness. The PLC members in the Bedford and Rossow (2017) study supported the same suggestion.

6.8.4 Active Membership

As Chapter 5 indicated, some members preferred to be silent and listen to others for most of the meetings. Therefore, a few members noticeably dominated the PLC meetings to maintain the flow of the discussions. The findings spotlight the necessity of having active members in the PLC who are willing to share their ideas and experiences, so other members know their thoughts. This active engagement and participation can lead to improved practices and performance in the institution (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

6.8.5 Assigning a Leader in the PLC

To have a sustainable PLC, Sally suggested having a leader of the PLC team who would arrange various tasks and meetings and follow up on their achievement. As Section 6.4 points out, Sally explains that the members must be willing to work with the leader and share their ideas and

experiences. She argues that the culture of sharing is missing in the target institution. To change this, members must understand the value of sharing and working with others.

Therefore, the role of a PLC team leader is significant, ensuring that task performance and professional learning and collaboration are taking place in the community. Notably, in such communities as the RLC at University College London in the UK (Brown, 2017; Rose et al., 2017), the leader is part of the research community.

6.8.6 Ensuring a Positive Environment

This idea intertwines with those stated above because a positive environment enables teachers to share ideas and reflect on their practices, and it promotes their willingness to work with others in the team. Steven elucidated that creating a positive environment can occur by establishing an atmosphere of trust, openness and collaboration. Bolam et al. (2005) asserted these attributes, and many research settings have found them effective (Bedford & Rossow, 2017; Chen et al., 2016). Having a positive environment in a PLC contributes to positive results.

6.9 Conclusion

This chapter provided a detailed discussion of the research findings. It started with the members' perceptions of the teaching and learning process. Those perceptions were followed by presenting the members' professional growth needs. After that, the positive environment and atmosphere of the PLC were highlighted. Next, the members' learning-focused collaboration was addressed as well as their daily classroom practices and their reflections on them. After that, how theory and practice were linked in the PLC meetings was pointed out. The last section discussed how to improve the PLC in order to have it sustainable and more effective. In the next chapter, some conclusions, implications and recommendations for future research are presented. Also, the strengths and weaknesses of the study are summarized.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

The aims of the present study were first, to examine teachers' experiences when participating in a PLC for the first time and learn about their reflections on what works well and what requires improvement to have a successful PLC; and second to suggest methods for stakeholders and administrators to use PLCs as a tool for bolstering students' learning. To achieve these two aims, action research was conducted to establish an online PLC. Data were collected via three methods: preliminary content analysis of the reports produced by the Staff Development Committee (SDC), semistructured interviews and meeting observations. The PLC was evaluated twice using a comprehensive framework.

Overall, the findings indicate the positive impressions of the PLC members and a hopeful view that it be conducted again in the target institution with some amendments. There were many challenges that hindered members' active participation. The findings also highlight points to consider to ensure a sustainable PLC that is likely to work if the efforts of all stakeholders are united to improve students' achievements.

More details on what the findings show and imply are highlighted in this chapter. First, the key findings are summarised, whereby the research questions are revisited and answered. Subsequently, the chapter discusses how the study contributes to existing knowledge. This is followed by the academic and practical implications of the study. Next, areas for future research are addressed in light of the study limitations. The last two sections of this chapter highlight my personal reflections and include final remarks to conclude the thesis.

7.2 Teachers' Experiences and Perceptions of the PLC

To achieve the aims of the study abovementioned, one of the research questions that served as a guide for this study was:

1. What are teachers' experiences and perceptions after participating in an online PLC in the English Language Centre?
 - a. What benefits do teachers gain from participating in an online PLC?

- b. What challenges do teachers face when participating in an online PLC?

To establish the feasibility of establishing a PLC in the target setting, this action research aimed to create a PLC and discover the perceptions of the members following their first-hand experience of working in a team to achieve the goal of enhancing students' learning. As highlighted in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6, how the members experienced the PLC was observed during the meetings, along with interviewing them twice to understand these perceptions and experiences. To summarise the findings related to this research question, this section is divided into two sub-sections that discuss the benefits and challenges of the PLC.

7.2.1 The Benefits of Participating in the PLC

There are several benefits acknowledged in this study. The first is that the aim of the PLC directly matches the perceptions of the members towards the teaching and learning process. Overall, the members indicate that they perceive themselves as approachable, caring and guiding teachers who like their students to be active and responsible for their studies, and like to have student-centred classes. This is because such characteristics provide the students with a class environment where they can be motivated to learn and trust their skills as autonomous learners. Those perceptions form an apparent link between the focus of the PLC and the aim the members look for in the teaching and learning process, i.e., bolstering students' achievement. Hence, such perceptions act as a wheel that drives the members' desire to participate in the PLC, supporting the argument of Brownell et al. (2006).

The second benefit the members find very fruitful in their PLC experience is having a learning opportunity where they can grow professionally and meet their professional needs directly. The members highlighted that the PLC compliments the sessions and programmes designed by the SDC that address issues related to the educational process, such as how to use technology in teaching and how to meet quality assurance standards at the university level. This is because the areas that the PLC addressed were tailored to the members' needs via the method of asking them to mention the areas they wanted to focus on in it. It is worth mentioning that the structure and the focus of the PLC was an effective motive for many members to participate in it. This is because although the members highlighted the usefulness of the professional development sessions

conducted at departmental and university levels, they wanted more personalised sessions to closely discuss the challenges they face and benefit from the good practices of their colleagues. Therefore, the PLC was an opportunity for collective ‘professional growth’.

Another benefit is that this professional learning and growth was facilitated by a positive learning environment. The findings show that the members were willing to listen to each other, share their experiences and comment on other viewpoints in a friendly manner. Respect, trust and transparency were evident in the PLC, thus encouraging the members to share not only the good aspects of their daily practices but also the challenges and obstacles they encountered with their students.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that there was collaboration among the members focused on learning, though it was very limited (see section 7.2.2). Overall, there was a form of formal collaboration during the meetings, in which the members shared their concerns on how to support their students and help them improve their learning. The experiences and the topics the members highlighted reflect the genuine aim they all sought. When one member shared a concern or a difficulty they faced, other members interacted with it, shared similar concerns and supported that member by putting into the table practices that worked well with their students. Furthermore, some members expanded and took such discussions further by having chats on corridors on areas discussed in the meetings. These chats enabled them to closely follow up with each other on what had or had not worked with their students and why.

Moreover, collaboration was found in the form of sharing resources, even though this sharing was infrequent. For instance, one member shared her screen to show her marking techniques. Another shared a link to crossword puzzles she used in her class. In addition, there were some posts shared among the members where they shared techniques in how to overcome writing errors and be more autonomous.

Another benefit that the members gained from participating in this PLC was that they taught different levels in the foundation and post-foundation programme. Consequently, they gained knowledge about the levels they were not teaching. They also learned new practices from each

other, therefore improving their teaching and practice. An example of this is the use of local tasks to increase students' motivation, focusing on one error at a time when dealing with weak students, and asking excellent students to peer-teach and help their classmates.

In addition, the current PLC was supported by the articles I shared with the members so that they could examine them before the meetings. These articles were found to have a positive role in helping the members refresh their minds of recent research in the English Language Teaching (ELT) field and linking the theories and practices they read about with their own settings. Consequently, forming this link was an aid for reflective learning and an opportunity for quality professional growth.

7.2.2 The Challenges of Participating in the PLC

Despite the advantages of the PLC, there were several challenges noted in the present study. For example, some members took some time to freely and comfortably share their experiences and opinions regardless of the positive environment of the PLC. I had to call out their names during the first meetings to hear what they thought. As time passed and more meetings were conducted, they willingly participated and took the initiative to start discussions.

Another challenge was the limited collaboration in the PLC. Discussions on daily practices flowed smoothly during the meetings, However, little could be done outside the meetings due to time restrictions and the members' workload. Most of the members mentioned their inability to find time to go through the shared files in the PLC group and posting in MS Teams because they had a lot of teaching and administrative tasks to finish. Therefore, the priority was given to other tasks.

In addition, when there were meetings that cooccurred with the PLC meetings, those members chose to attend the other meetings. Therefore, more coordination with the target people is required, and some space needs to be allocated for the PLC to reduce members' pressure. It is worth noting that this would not be an issue if all staff fully recognised and appreciated the significance of the PLC and its effects. Therefore, section 7.4 addresses the idea of a cultural shift in the process of establishing the PLC.

Another challenge was the technical issues that both I and the members faced, especially at the beginning of the study. Considerable time was taken to resolve the technical issues with the account given to me to access the target institution domain and MS Teams. In addition, some members had a weak network and could not hear everything others said in the meetings. Furthermore, some members lacked access to the camera and joined the meeting by microphone only.

7.3 The Possibility of Establishing a PLC

The second guiding question of this research was:

2. Based on the strengths and challenges of participating in the PLC, how can it be improved and utilised to enhance both teacher and student learning?

To examine the feasibility of establishing a PLC in the target context, the PLC under investigation was evaluated twice by the members during their interviews. In addition, the last meeting contained reflections on the whole PLC. The evaluation of the PLC has proved to be essential at all times to ensure improvement in practices and both staff and student learning. The first evaluation done during Interview A gave a picture of what went well and what could be done to improve collective learning in the second half of the semester. The second evaluation indicated how well the whole PLC worked and areas for improvement. Overall, the above findings indicate that the benefits of the PLC outweigh the challenges. In other words, the PLC is a practical and effective step that can be taken not only to bolster student learning but also to provide ‘free opportunities’ for professional growth using the existing tools of the institution.

When examining successful PLCs worldwide, it is clear that this big project was not achieved in a day and night. Numerous steps were involved to make institutions shift from isolated and individual learning to collective learning and sharing. More importantly, there have been considerable efforts spent in fertilising the culture and the environment of the institution to ensure the PLC is sustained. Therefore, the present study examined this possibility of establishing a PLC, evaluated it using Guskey's (2014) framework, and concluded that all stakeholders and educators need to be involved to start changing the present culture and move towards a more sustained and bigger PLC.

Another point to address is that the present study involved members who were willing and motivated to meet the goal of collective learning and support because their participation was voluntary. They learned and developed their practices during their participation in the PLC. They believed that sharing ideas, reflections, experiences and viewpoints would benefit them and their colleagues in the PLC. Therefore, the discussions were fruitful, and all the members reported that they learned something from each meeting they attended. However, they were not satisfied and regretted their limited participation overall. For this reason, some of the practical steps that would improve this community are assigning tasks to maintain collective responsibility towards learning outside the meetings, and assigning leaders to follow up the accomplishment of tasks, which would increase member commitment. To ensure that all members benefit in the same manner, roles can be shifted, including leadership. More implications and steps can be considered and derived from this study; these are highlighted in Section 7.5. The impressions of the members support the literature and prove the effectiveness of the PLC in developing institutions and staff.

Moreover, as highlighted in the early chapters, this study was conducted online due to the Coronavirus pandemic. However, the pandemic has provided a useful opportunity to observe the merits of being online in the PLC. It made it easy to interact, share files and store them in one place so that the members can find them easily when needed, even after the study was finished. The online aspect increases the possibility of creating and working in the PLC. Therefore, stakeholders can consider working online on some tasks and aspects of the PLC, especially when the members have different schedules and working hours.

7.4 Contribution to Knowledge

The present study makes numerous contributions to existing knowledge. These are divided into theoretical contributions and methodological contributions, and are highlighted below.

7.4.1 Theoretical Contributions

This study makes several theoretical contributions to the Omani context and other international contexts. One of the original contributions the study offers is the positive view of professional development activities (PD). As stated in Chapter 3, many researchers have a negative connotation

of PD and view it as a top-down approach; PD activities are attended for the sake of meeting administrative requirements (see, for example, Borko, 2004; Vangrieken et al., 2015). The same view is reported in the Omani context (Al Riyami, 2016; Almanthari, 2019). The present study suggests that PD has a positive impact and that the activities organised at a top level by a committee for example – as is the case in this study – are beneficial. This is because they widen staff horizons by gaining information in broader aspects related to the educational process, such as being aware of quality assurance in teaching and learning. Also, as highlighted in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6, some PD activities are conducted to improve certain skills that can enable teachers to teach effectively. For instance, because teachers in the target institution shifted to online teaching due to Coronavirus pandemic, the target institution organized several sessions to teach teachers how to use various software and technology tools to deliver their classes online. So, such PD activities have a positive impact in assisting teachers to learn skills and expand their knowledge in order to develop their performance as teachers in their classes.

Second, most of the studies done in the Omani context deal with theoretical aspects of PD such as exploring the tenants of PD (Al Ghatrifi, 2016) and understanding the needs and perceptions towards PD (Al Hosni, 2019). The present study finds that in spite of the usefulness of the PD activities, they are not sufficient for professional growth. Consequently, by doing action research, the study suggests that accompanying them with a PLC will maximise staff learning and ensure that the unique needs and voices are heard by stakeholders. This is because the focus of the PLC is the direct needs of the staff involved in it. Those staff have direct communication with their students. Therefore, they may have needs that are very specific to their own class settings, and those needs can be discussed by those teachers with other members in their PLC group to gain the support and guidance they require.

Third, the study investigates staff perceptions towards the PLC by establishing it in the target setting. To the best of my knowledge, there is no published research that focuses on PLCs in the higher education (HE) context in Oman. There are certain practices such as the events created for PD in various institutions in Oman (Al-Lamki, 2009; Al Ghatrifi, 2016). In addition, some PLCs have been recently created and investigated at school level (Al-Habsi et al., 2022; Al-Yahmadi & Al-Sammakhi, 2021). However, PLCs are not widely created in the education field in general, and

in HE specifically. Therefore, this study is the first to address the Omani HE context and emphasises the need to have new innovations for staff professional growth and learning. The establishment of a PLC enabled the members to have first-hand experiences in an environment that they found friendly and supportive. Unlike many PD activities that take the form of lecturing in the target institution and other institutions in Oman (Al Ghatrifi, 2016; Al Hosni, 2019), the members in the target PLC had the opportunity to share reflections, experiences, and link research articles to their classroom experiences. In addition, the present study adds to the limited studies conducted in the Arabian context.

Furthermore, the study is conducted in a context where the culture of individual and isolated work is dominant. This does not mean that staff do not share materials; there is sharing and there is a considerable amount of materials developed by group work such as the supplementary materials developed in each foundation and post-foundation level. However, those materials are developed and shared because of the work mechanism and policy in the target institution. Therefore, in this context and other similar contexts, this study provides a starting point that guides policy makers and educators to focus on culture change (DuFour et al., 2021) as they work on putting the PLC into practice. Developing a positive culture within the institution can contribute to the success of the PLC. In the present study, this positive culture was there among the members who volunteered to take part in the study because they believe in group work and the significance of professional growth. Thus, the members found the atmosphere of working with each other supportive and encouraging them to be open and trust one another. Therefore, they reported learning many skills and new practices in Chapter 5. If the positive culture is not there, the first stages of establishing the PLC should focus on changing culture and then moving around and start working on the PLC.

7.4.2 Methodological Contributions

First, the study employs practical action research to explore the PLC and make any necessary changes (Kemmis et al., 2014) following its establishment. Using this methodology encourages stakeholders to use it when creating their own PLCs. Practical action research opens up opportunities for a mutual relationship between the members and policy-makers for monitoring improvements in staff practices and students' learning and tackling the weaknesses and challenges they encounter. Furthermore, the conceptual framework of the study that the eight characteristics of Bolam et al. (2005) informed can act as a set of signposts to guide the establishment and

evaluation of the PLC. These characteristics are comprehensive and address the features and strengths of PLCs in school and higher education settings. Chapter 3 discusses some of these studies.

Second, the study is conducted online, demonstrating that this can be a practical option to establish a PLC. In addition, the study uses MS Teams as its communication platform. Throughout the study, there were some technical challenges that were addressed during the early stages of the study. Therefore, MS Teams can be an option for institutions and researchers to create and examine PLCs because it is used by numerous educational universities and colleges worldwide, and it is an easy-to-use platform that provides many features such as chatting, recording, video and audio calling, and storing files.

Third, as the study examines staff perceptions of the PLC subsequent to their participation in it, it can be used as a basis when planning the establishment of PLCs in contexts that have not experienced them yet. This is because the findings of the study highlight the positive aspects and the challenges that can be avoided by stakeholders as well as what to anticipate from the beginning of the PLC.

Fourth, the study offers a practical methodological contribution to establishing the PLC. It uses socio-constructivist paradigm in which the members of the PLC can construct knowledge via participating in the PLC meetings and sharing posts and reflections. Through the PLC, the members are offered an opportunity for continuous learning and development, which Al Hosni (2019) calls for in her study. So, the present study encourages policy makers to involve academics when designing PD activities to share knowledge and expertise and work in ongoing activities to maximize their learning via establishing PLCs. Such PLCs can involve academic and administrative staff who can work together for the purpose of bolstering student learning.

7.5 Implications of the Study

The study provides implications at academic and practical levels. Each is spotlighted in the following sections.

7.5.1 Academic Implications

After implementing and evaluating this PLC, there are many points to consider to have a better, more sustainable PLC. The first point concerns reinforcing the culture of sharing and supporting one another. In the PLC, this culture is present and the positive atmosphere the members feel has resulted in making them be more open to and trust and respect each other. However, Sally stated that this culture is not present in the target institution. It can be reinforced by acknowledging what teachers do and encouraging the sharing of ideas, practices and resources. Increasing members' awareness of the impact of sharing in one's own learning and the collective learning of the institution is important to ensure a sustainable PLC. In other words, the administrative staff have a big role to play in creating this positive culture and atmosphere that results in a better environment and a better learning culture. For this reason, several researchers such as Chen et al. (2016) and Trilaksono et al. (2019) denote the impact of a positive environment on the success of a PLC.

Another point is the importance of allocating sufficient time to the area the members want to develop and learn about. Paul argued that going deep when learning is better to sharpen knowledge in that area. Going deep or focusing on one area per semester can help the members to know more about the target area and experience more practices. Furthermore, it enables educators and policy makers to monitor and evaluate students' learning in a good period of time.

Furthermore, the scale of PLCs can be extended to involve society. When society supports the vision of the institutions, the high value society pays to education can influence the students to realise its importance; hence, they become more motivated to learn and develop themselves. Consequently, the mission of the PLC members becomes easier and students' academic performance becomes stronger due to social support (Huffman et al., 2016).

7.5.2 Practical Implications

One of the practical implications that can be derived from this study is that the involvement of all stakeholders and educators in the PLC is vital in its establishment. This is because such involvement will make it easy to overcome the challenges that may hinder the professional learning process. For instance, one of the main challenges the members in this study faced was the workload and tasks they were required to finish. When administrative staff are involved, they can

tackle such barriers and reduce the number of tasks they require from their staff, making staff more relaxed and more willing to spare time for collective learning.

In addition, when all stakeholders are part of the PLC, the evaluation of it becomes smooth. This is because working in the PLC can involve suggesting changes that are not in the members' hands. Therefore, when the administration supports the PLC and provides the opportunity for suggestions and changes, this can influence the members' motivation to learn and support their students. Overall, evaluation is significant for amending plans and making the PLC more organised so that the goals are achieved and students' learning is enhanced. Continuous evaluation is essential to sustain the PLC (Bolam et al., 2005; Stoll et al., 2006).

Another significant point which educators, managers and policy makers should consider is that culture is a vital element to address if they seek to develop successful and sustainable PLCs. This is the soil in which the PLC flourishes, depending on how fertile the soil is. In other words, a culture of collaboration, sharing, constant learning and evaluation is necessary to achieve the shared goals of the institution. If this culture is missing, staff will view the PLC as a task to be done during a pre-specified time slot rather than feeling that they are a community that continuously reviews and evaluates every practice and policy. The reality is that transforming a culture to a collective and collaborative one in contexts where many people prefer to work in isolation is difficult. For this reason, DuFour et al. (2021) contend that it is a gradual process that can be assessed and improved with the strong determination of educators.

Furthermore, the structure of the PLC should be more organised. Some members, such as Sally and Robert, suggested having leaders and more members in the PLC. This is to ensure that all members participate equally and to provide more shared responsibility among the members. As mentioned in Section 6.5.3, leadership can be shared and responsibilities can be shifted, including leadership, to ensure that the members know what they are supposed to do, and are prepared and committed to this learning opportunity. Kline (2007) asserts that leadership can be a prerequisite when establishing a PLC.

7.6 Limitations of the Study

There were some potential difficulties and limitations that I encountered when conducting this research that I could not predict and avoid in advance. They are discussed in this section.

First, the present study lacks using other data as evidence of students' learning. It relies only on the members' observations of their own classes. Therefore, this study can be improved and expanded by using technical action research (Kemmis et al., 2014) and utilising students' test scores in order to compare their learning as they progress in their studies. Using such data would support meeting observations and interviews in terms of whether learning is taking place. Also, test scores could be used as a basis of discussion in the meetings along with the articles the members read before meetings.

Another limitation was that although the study was conducted in Oman, none of the PLC members were Omani. There was one Omani member who withdrew towards the end of the study. If this study is to be conducted in another Omani context or in other countries with staff from different nationalities, it is suggested that some of the participants should be from the local culture as they would contribute to the PLC by sharing the students' culture and background. Knowing the background of the students well would assist in identifying ways to assist their learning. The present study included members who have been working in Oman for a long time, so they understand the Omani culture and know the values and beliefs of the students.

Besides, the sample was selective and represented how the PLC would work in the target institution if all the members had a positive culture of sharing and the same vision and goals towards self-professional growth and the development of the students. So, the findings were suggestive. Also, the sample had the limitation of not including participants with negative views of sharing and the desire to keep their best practices to themselves. When the PLC is including more members, there might be a group of people in the PLC who decide not to learn positively for many reasons (e.g., gossiping or disapproving good practices of other members that are not evidence-based). This limitation needs to be considered and the administrative staff or the leader of the PLC need to think of practical ways to change such negative views of those members to positive ones so that they become more productive in the PLC.

7.7 Areas for Future Research

As highlighted in Section 7.3.2, practical action research can be used at the early stages of establishing PLCs. When PLCs are well-established, it is suggested that researchers associate it with other types of action research such as technical action research (Kemmis et al., 2014) to involve other means to measure the improvement of students' learning.

Another point to consider is that this study could have come to different findings had it been conducted with a different group of members, depending on their perceptions, interests and learning skills. Therefore, the findings are suggestive and not conclusive. Therefore, to support their goals, future studies can recruit more members and expand the PLC network to other HE contexts and society. For example, a PLC can be created to recruit members from other branches in the same HEI or expand to other colleges and universities to increase the level of variation in experiences, reflections and practices.

Furthermore, the period of establishing and evaluating the PLC can be extended rather than limiting it to one semester as was the case with this study which had to meet a submission deadline. Future studies can build on the findings of this study and use more data collection tools such as questionnaires and reflective journals to get more insights about the experiences of the members, what is going well, and what needs to be improved.

As highlighted in Chapter 5 and 6, the culture in the target setting does not encourage sharing ideas and practices. It is suggested to carry out a study in the Omani context and other similar international contexts to find out why most staff tend to be close to themselves and avoid working and sharing ideas with their colleagues. Also, a study can be conducted to examine how staff can be motivated to change such individualistic culture and how to encourage them to share their best practices and reflections.

7.8 Personal Reflections

PLCs are projects that provide institutions with opportunities to link research and practice and observe how they mutually inform each other in a beneficial manner. Working on this action research was a great learning opportunity which allowed me to sharpen my research skills and

learn more about the Omani context. Working on the PLC has opened my eyes to the challenges many teachers face and made me realise that when teachers have the desire to change and assist their students, they take every possible means and attempt to grasp any learning opportunity to ensure a better learning environment. I admit that working on my thesis has involved considerable ups and downs, but I learned a lot from every comment from my supervisors. I had many sleepless nights, and there were many times when I felt disappointed and depressed because I could not think of more ideas nor move a single step forward; but eventually the ideas came and with them came hope! This thesis has come to an end, but it is the beginning of a new journey of research, learning and development.

7.9 The Current Study: Time for Another New Story

Many well-known films embrace teachers who, in isolation, strive and fight to make a difference and change in their students' lives. Although such teachers are often viewed as super-people and heroes, it is time for another new story; time to re-culture contexts such as the Omani context and establish a culture of openness, sharing and collective work. The PLC is one of the methods by which staff can work together to achieve what individuals would never have achieved alone. Realistically, it will take time and effort, but eventually there can be a situation in which all educators and stakeholders collaborate to change minds and beliefs, before changing the physical settings of their workplaces.

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Appendix 1: Ethical Approval from the University of Bristol- The UK



September 29, 2020

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing in my capacity as Chair of the Research Ethics Committee in the School of Education, at the University of Bristol.

The postgraduate PhD Research Project entitled “Examining the Perceptions of Academic Staff of a PLC in an English Language Centre at a Higher Education Institution in Oman” (Ref: 111722) proposed by Badriya Al Masroori (Primary Supervisor: Dr. Robin Shields) received final sign-off and approval from the School of Education’s Research Ethics Committee on September 29, 2020.

If I can provide additional information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,



Amanda Williams, PhD
Senior Lecturer in Social Psychology
Chair, School of Education Research Committee

a.williams@bristol.ac.uk

Appendix 2: Part of the Ethical Approval from the University of Technology and Applied Sciences- Oman

السلام عليكم ورحمة الله وبركاته وبعد...

الموضوع: تسهيل مهمة باحثة

بالإشارة إلى الموضوع أعلاه، يرجى التكرم بالعلم بأنه لا مانع لدينا من اجراء الباحثة/ بدرية بنت علي بن سلطان السرورية، المبتعثة ضمن البرنامج الوطني للدراسات العليا بوزارة التعليم العالي والبحث العلمي والإبتكار، للتطبيق الميداني لأداة الدراسة بالكلية التقنية بإبراء، وذلك كأحد متطلبات نيل مؤهل الدكتوراة في التربية من جامعة برستول بالملكة المتحدة (University of Bristol-UK) عن:

Examining the Perceptions of Academic Staff of a PLC in an English Language Centre at a Higher Education Institution in Oman

أملين منكم التكرم بتقديم التسهيلات اللازمة التي تحتاج إليها الباحثة حيال ذلك

وتفضلوا بقبول فائق الاحترام والتقدير،،،

د. علي بن سعود الغيري
المدير العام المساعد للتعليم التقني



نسخة مع التحية،
✦ للدراسة العامة للتعليم التقني
✦ دائرة الشؤون الأكاديمية

Appendix 3: Ethical Approval from National Centre for Statistics and Information

رقم: م و ا م / ١٢٦٣ / 2020
التاريخ: ٤ / ربيع الأول / 1442 هـ
الموافق: ١٠ / نوفمبر / 2020

المحترمة

الفاضلة / بدرية بنت علي بن سلطان المسروية
طالبة دكتوراه بجامعة برستول بالملكة المتحدة

تحية طيبة وبعد،،،

الموضوع: إجراء مسح بعنوان دراسة تصورات وآراء الموظفين الأكاديميين لمجتمع التعلم
الإحترافي في أحد مؤسسات التعليم العالي في عمان

بالإشارة إلى طلبكم حول الموافقة على الموضوع أعلاه ، يسرنا إفادتكم بعدم ممانعة المركز من إجراء الدراسة، مع تأكيدنا عليكم بضرورة المحافظة على سرية البيانات الفردية للمشاركين واستخدامها لأغراض الدراسة فقط وليس للنشر العام على أي مستوى آخر، والالتزام بطرق توزيع الاستبانة على موظفي المؤسسات الحكومية حسب ماتم ذكره من قبلكم. كما نود التنويه بأن المركز لن يتحمل أية مسؤولية أو تبعات قانونية ناجمة عن قيامكم بهذه الدراسة.

وننوه أيضا إلى أن هذه الموافقة على جمع البيانات سارية حتى شهر مايو 2021م، وفي حال رغبتكم في إعادة تنفيذ هذه الدراسة مستقبلا أو أي دراسات أخرى تتطلب جمع بيانات من المجتمع يرجى التكرم بالتقدم بطلب جديد.

وتفضلوا بقبول فائق التقدير والاحترام،،

عمر | سوسن بنت داود بن محمود اللواتية
المديرة العام للمعلومات

Appendix 4: PD Sessions Conducted by Internal Speakers in the Academic Year 19/20

Staff Development Program AY 2019-2020

Item No.	Semester	Activity	Topic	Responsibility	Venue, Date & Time
1	Semester 1	Workshop	<i>Flipped Classroom Using Edpuzzle</i>	Conduceted by Internal Speakers	Dates, timings, and rooms are provided in this column
2		Workshop	<i>Using Office (Word, Excel, Powerpoint) Effectively in Teaching and Planning</i>		
3		Workshop	<i>Using Kahoot! in the Classroom</i>		
4		Presentation	<i>Technology Integrated in English Language Teaching</i>		
		Presentation	<i>An Seminar on Action Research</i>		
5		Workshop	<i>Introduction to Research Writing</i>		
6	Semester 2	Presentation	<i>The Arab Culture</i>		
7		Workshop	<i>Teaching Beginners</i>		
8		Workshop	<i>Prezi for Effective Presentations</i>		
9		Workshop	<i>Research Writing</i>		


Appendix 5: PD Sessions Conducted by Internal Speakers in the Academic Year 19/20

EXTERNAL STAFF DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

Date: 14-Jun-20


SN	Name of the Program	Name of the Presenter	Organization /Sponsor	Date/s	Venue	Remarks
1	Learning to Teach Online		University of New South Wales (UNSW) Sydney, Australia		via Coursera	
2	Teaching Online - Using the Coursebook and Using Breakout Rooms		British Council		Webinar	
3	Teaching Online - Alternative Platforms, Lesson Structure and Task-Types		British Council		Webinar	
4	Teaching Online - Tech Tools and Tutor Presence		British Council		Webinar	
5	Kahoot! in Higher Ed Webinar		Kahoot!		Webinar	
6	Supporting and Mentoring Teachers Remotely		British Council		Webinar	
7	Kahoot! and Google Classroom Webinar		Kahoot!		Webinar	
8	Effective Online Instruction (FRANKLIN Webinar Series)		Modern College of Business and Science		via Zoom	

Appendix 6: PowerPoint Presentation Used for the Introductory Meeting

Slide 1: Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)
Badriya Al Masroori


Slide 2: Session Outline:

- What PLCs are
- Benefits of PLCs
- Characteristics of PLCs
- The current Study

Slide 3: What are PLCs?
They are “groups of educators working together with a collective purpose of high student achievement.”
(Henderson, 2018, p. 39)


Slide 4: The concept of PLCs suggests:

- Collective professional learning
- The target is how students learn better rather than what to teach them.

Slide 5:

- Professional: well-regarded resources
- Learning: student learning and adult learning
- Community: supportive environment

(Cowen, 2010)

Slide 6: Benefits of PLCs
A positive environment for:

- Active roles
- Self-development and reflections
- Improving classroom practices

The participants in Wood's (2007, p. 290) study “began to think of themselves as primary agents for necessary changes in teaching and learning. In order for their students to achieve more, they knew they needed to be constantly learning”.

Characteristics of PLCs

- | | |
|--|--------------------------------------|
| Shared Values and Vision | Reflective Personal Inquiry |
| Collective Responsibility for Students' Learning | Openness, Networks, and Partnerships |
| Collaboration Focused on Learning | Inclusive Membership |
| Individual and Collective Professional Learning | Mutual Trust, Respect, and Support |



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The current Study...



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- Context: ELC, done online
- Time: One semester (semester 2, AY 2020/21)
- Target: boosting student learning via teachers' professional learning

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How It will work...

- Finalizing areas of professional learning
- **Sharing articles and other resources** (should be read before the meetings)
- **Meetings** (in teachers' convenient time)- about two meetings each month
- **Discussions and reflections** in meetings and when needed
- **Interviews** during the semester

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Main ethics considerations in the study

- Data will be anonymized, used for research purposes.
- Confidentiality
- Right to Withdraw
- No identified harm to participate

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Any Questions?

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Appendix 7: Study Information Sheet

Information sheet

Thank you very much for your interest in this study. This information sheet explains what the study aims to investigate and how I would like you to take part in it.

The purpose of this study is to examine your experiences when participating in an online professional learning community (PLC). PLCs are mainly created to provide staff with the environment where they can develop and learn professionally in order to meet the primary goal of the education system, that is boosting student learning. In PLCs, staff work collectively, share practices, reflect, evaluate and support one another.

In order to elicit your viewpoints and benefit from your knowledge and experiences in this study, you will be asked to take part in an intervention with a group of staff with whom you share the same interests in professional learning. If you agree to this, you will be working online with a team in which you will be doing some activities that I will explain to you in our first meeting. You will have the opportunity to suggest the areas that you would like to professionally develop and learn in order to implement later in your classes based on the target that the whole group wants to achieve to boost student achievement.

Please note that all the meetings and interviews will be done online using Microsoft Teams. The interviews will last about an hour and will be conducted in the time that is appropriate for you.

The information you provide in the interviews and the information the researcher gets from meeting observations will be used for the research purposes and will NOT be used in a way that would allow identifying you from your responses.

At the end of the study, anonymized research data will be stored at the University of Bristol Drive to ensure the safety of data, maintain confidentiality and privacy, and avoid harming the participants in any manner. Please note that your data will be protected and stored as per The General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR). For more information on these regulations please see <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/secretary/data-protection/>. Be assured that data will be destroyed after 3-5 years of submitting the study.

You may contact the head of the Academic Research Committee or the first supervisor of this research in case you have any complaints about the study.

Prof Robin Shields

First Supervisor of this Study

University of Bristol

robin.shields@bristol.ac.uk

Be assured that your participation will cause you no harm and will not affect your academic status and rating at your work and the data will be used for research purposes only.

Once again, I would like to thank you for your interest in this research and taking part in it. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at any stage of the research. Please take some time to read and sign the consent form if you agree to take part in the study and send it to me within two days.

Badriya Al Masroori
Doctorate Student, EdD
University of Bristol, UK
dg18354@bristol.ac.uk
badriya@ict.edu.om

Appendix 8: Consent Form

Participant Consent Form

I understand:

- The study information sheet sent with this form is clear and I agree to it.
- Taking part in this study will involve participating online in meetings with the researcher and other participating staff, being interviewed and observed.
- My words may be quoted in a thesis, publications, reports, and other research output without using my name and my personal and employment details.
- I can withdraw from the study at any time, and I will not be asked to provide reasons for my decision not to take part any longer in the study.

I agree to be contacted by the researcher after the study to check and validate my responses.

Name of the participant: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix 9: Participant Details and Interests

Name	
Nationality	
Years of experience at UTAS	
Years of experience in other institutions	
Level you taught last semester	
Have you participated in professional development activities inside the university? If yes, please mention them briefly.	
Have you participated in professional development activities outside the university? If yes, please mention them briefly.	
What area(s) would you like to develop professionally in the PLC to boost students' learning? <u>Please list the areas that can be applicable to all foundation and post foundation levels</u>⁵	

⁵ Please note that due to time constraints, the researcher will notify you of about 3-4 areas pointed out by most of the participants to work on in the PLC after you submit the form.

Appendix 10: PLC Timetable Shared with the Members

PLC Timetable

Area	Task Time
1. Sending an article on “Critical Thinking Skills” (before the meeting)	Week 2
Discussion of how to work on area No. 1	Week 2- Online meeting (26 th Jan)
Discussion of how you focused on area No. 1	Week 4- Online meeting (9 th Feb)
2. Sending articles on “Learner Autonomy + Intrinsic Motivation” (before the meeting)	Week 4
Discussion of how to work on areas No. 2	Week 4- Online meeting
Discussion of how you focused on areas No. 2	Week 6- Online meeting (23 rd Feb)
Discussion on how it was going until the midterm exam	Week 8- Online meeting (9 th March)
3. Sending an article on “Error Correction in Written Work” (before the meeting)	Week 8
Discussion of how to work on area No. 3	Week 8- online meeting
Discussion of how you focused on area No. 3	Week 11- Online Meeting (30 th March)
Sharing final thoughts on the PLC	Week 11- Online Meeting

Important Notes:

1. All meetings will be conducted on Tuesdays at 12:00. Please DO NOT miss them.
2. Meeting times will be fixed. However, if you think you need more time to work on a specific area on the table, please let me know so that we do not start sharing materials on another area until you think you are ready.
3. I will send one or two articles and then will send other resources if I find something useful.
4. Please DO share resources if you have materials that you think will be of help to the team.
5. When working with your students, you can focus on other areas (whether they are listed in the table above or not). You may wish to continue working on all the target areas until your last day of teaching.
6. The timings are allocated based on the tentative exam weeks on the academic calendar. We may need to amend this plan if exam weeks change.

Appendix 11: PLC Plan Shared with the Members

Dear members, I am finalising the areas that you suggested for the PLC earlier this week. The plan for the PLC is as follows:

- We will focus on one area for two weeks. If you think you need more time on one area, please let me know as the plan is flexible and you are leading the PLC.
- I am planning to start working on the PLC next week. After finalising the areas, I will post them in our team on MS Teams so that you comment on the timing allocated for each area.
- I will send an article on the area we will start with (details will be sent later) on the beginning of next week so that you have a plenty of time to read it. Our meetings will be done every two weeks (if you think two weeks are enough to work on the target area) on **Tuesdays at 12:00. Meetings should not exceed an hour.**
- Make sure you read the article to have a general idea about the target area before the meeting.
- During the meeting, you will be discussing the article and suggesting how to focus on that area in your classes. You are also encouraged to share experiences, resources or reflections during the meeting and on MS Teams at any time after the meeting.
- Anticipated challenges are a significant part that need to be addressed in the PLC meetings. Also, you need to discuss how to overcome them in your class practices.
- Please make sure that what you share with the team is relevant to the target area the team is working on.
- I will lead the beginning of the first meeting and then, the stage is yours to lead the meetings and take the responsibility of your learning in the PLC.
- You are welcome to discuss any other issues related to the areas you are working on.
- There will be no meetings during exam weeks and the whole work on the PLC will finish before the final exams.

Appendix 12: Meeting observation Form

Online Semistructured Meeting Observation Form

Time: _____

Attendees: _____

Area	Notes
Aim of the meeting	
Any shared experiences, values, ideas, vision:	
Any reflections on practices/ any critical questions on target areas raised:	
Are all members engaged and active in discussions?	
Are members given responsibilities?	

Any difficulties shared?	
Any suggestions provided?	
Do members respect others' opinions?	
Other comments and field notes:	

Appendix 13: Interview A Questions

Online Semistructured Interview Protocol (Interview A)

Interviewee: _____

Date & Time: _____

Note: The interview questions will differ from one participant to another based on their responses during the interview. However, the questions below will be asked to all participants.

- How would your students describe you as a teacher?
- What motivates you to develop yourself and learn professionally?
- As a teacher, do you think you should have the right to attend and engage only in activities that help you learn what you want based on your students' needs?
- What have you learnt from participating in the PLC so far?
- What are the key qualities or characteristics of a PLC?
- What are the things that you think went well in the PLC?
- How was your relationship with other members?
- To what extent was responsibility shared among the members to learn collectively?
- What is your view of collaboration in the PLC?
- How did you find sharing your experiences and practices with other members?
- To what extent has your participation influenced your classroom practices?
- Have you noticed any influence in your students' learning during this semester so far?
- To what extent do you think participating in the PLC contributes to develop members' learning skills?
- How did you find the articles shared on MS Team?
- To what extent do you think working with other members develops trust and provides the support each member needs in order to learn?
- Have you encountered any stress or difficulties when participating in the PLC so far?
- If yes, what do you suggest to be done in the PLC in the coming weeks to reduce such stress or difficulties?

The following prompts will be used:

- Can you provide an example?
- Can you tell me more about your thinking and what you mean by....?
- Why do you think that ...?

Appendix 14: Interview B Questions

Online Semistructured Interview Protocol (**Interview B**)

Interviewee: _____

Date & Time: _____

Note: The interview questions will differ from one participant to another based on their responses during the interview. However, the questions below will be asked to all participants.

- What have you learnt from participating in the PLC?
- What are the things that you think went well?
- How was your relationship with other members?
- To what extent was responsibility shared among the members?
- What is your view of collaboration in the PLC?
- How did you find sharing your experiences and practices with other members?
- To what extent has your participation influenced your classroom practices?
- Have you noticed any influence in your students' learning during this semester?
- To what extent do you think participating in the PLC contributes to develop members' learning skills?
- To what extent do you think working with other members develops trust and provides the support each member needs in order to learn?
- Have you encountered any stress when participating in the PLC?
- What areas or aspects do you think need to be improved so that the PLC works better?
- Do you think you are willing to participate in the PLC again?
- What is your perception of the possibility of creating a PLC in the institution?

The following prompts will be used:

- Can you provide an example?
- Can you tell me more about your thinking and what you mean by....?
- Why do you think that ...?

Appendix 15: An Example of Initial Coming to Know the Data, Highlighting Possible Codes and Themes

Badriya: What have you learned so far from this participation?

Paul: Actually, what I really liked is about how different teachers view and perceive a, you know, learning process, motivation factors like that. I really like it because otherwise it is more of one man's point of view of it is my point of view of my perception of what really happens, how students feel. How they feel motivated. Even one point, for example Sheila, the other day when she talked... do you remember Emma when she talked about Omani students and then we talked about extrinsic motivation and intrinsic motivation. It was really very good to learn from different people. It kind of broadens your worldview. It depends it and you sometimes probably are mistaken. You have certain misappropriated perception, so kind of it self-corrects your own point of view, sometimes enhances your point of view, broadens it, deepens it. So I really like this kind of teamwork. That is exactly what I have learned.

Badriya: So what do you think the key characteristics or qualities of a PLC should be?

Paul: Uh, as I rightly pointed out, what I believe is that a professional learning community should be a devoted community given to pursue, OK, given to the pursuit of knowledge in appointed field because it is not possible that we, you know, talk of one field in one meeting and then go to another field in another meeting. I don't think that's going to serve the purpose. It's not going to broaden or deepen our worldview. Maybe it may broaden our worldview, but not deepen. So I think it is better that we stick to one area, do something, come and discuss and then again probably modify our methodology approach a bit and then try doing it in the classroom. Again, come and discuss if we are devoted and committed and focused. I think that is exactly what a PLC is for. As if it is mainly for a particular research project, if it is, idea is to broaden, you know. I think it depends upon the

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What learned from PLC

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Good quote! It shows what is learned from PLC and team work.

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Characteristics of PLC

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This quote and the previous sentence give a very important suggestion for the PLC if it is to be implemented again. It should focus on one area at a time

Appendix 16: Summary of Themes and Subthemes

<p>Perceptions towards teaching and learning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Believes in student-centred approach - Guiding teacher - Approachable, concerned with academic performance and students' problems 	<p>Views of PD</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Appreciating having mandatory and optional sessions (to learn more) - Helps gain ideas in more general fields
<p>Reasons for participation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Nature and goal of the PLC (Sharing experiences in a structured environment to support students) - Focusing on what practices to change/improve - The teacher should be a learner/ learning about latest updates on language learning - Learning something new - PLC was based on members' interests - Develop research skills 	<p>Benefits of the PLC</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Having friendly members with different experiences willing to share ideas - Topics/ focus of the PLC - Reading articles - Reflecting on what mentioned in articles and class practices - Developing members' learning skills and being more reflective - Supportive colleagues (motivated, open, friendly) - positive environment (trust, respect) - Collaboration (mainly during meetings) - Influence on classroom practices (e.g. motivation, peer teaching, how to give feedback, linking the local culture to classroom tasks, knowing about other foundation and post-foundation levels)
<p>Challenges</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Time - Workload - Technical issues 	<p>How challenges affected participation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of shared responsibility - Lack of collaboration - Lack of communication and interaction outside meetings (corridor chats and more sharing among some members only)
<p>Suggestions for improvement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Having more time for the PLC/time management - Reducing workload. - Focusing on one area - Assigning more tasks - Having more members - Having a team leader - managerial support 	