A blended Approach of Ngee Ann’s Professional Learning Community (PLC)

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ABSTRACT
Ngee Ann Secondary School has established a Professional Learning Community (PLC) whereby all teachers are put into learning teams with the objective of giving teachers the opportunities for collaborative inquiry and to develop and share a body of wisdom gleaned from their experiences.

The PLC is built on the research-based Teaching for Understanding (TfU) framework as a tool to design, revise and review instruction that helps students develop understanding with focus on pedagogies like Artful Thinking and Socratic Questioning. Using the elements of the TfU framework, teachers in different learning teams plan, execute and evaluate a lesson with the intention of helping students develop good understanding of the subject concepts or topics.

Aside from the face to face sessions, the school has also tapped and harnessed the potential of the Web-based applications in the emerging cloud computing services to develop a collaborative school community with its own identity, Ngee Ann 2.0. The school has adopted Microsoft’s Live@Edu at zero cost to harness a suite of applications to collaborate and communicate with department teachers on projects, and stay connected with friends in an increasingly Web-connected world.

Keywords - innovation, technology, professional learning community.

1 INTRODUCTION
Ngee Ann Secondary School (NAS) is one of the 51 pilot schools to implement Professional Learning Community (PLC) across Singapore. Living in the ever-changing 21st Century education paradigm, in order for teachers to adapt to the challenging learning needs of our technology-savvy students, it is pertinent that teachers work alongside each other to share resources and expertise so as to achieve positive student outcomes. In establishing the PLC, NAS went on a whole school approach to include all teaching staff on the PLC journey, leveraging on the power of technology to create a collegial learning environment to share our views and resources.

2 DEVELOPING A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY IN SCHOOL

2.1 Rationale and Principles of Professional Learning Community (PLC)
PLCs provide participants with “the opportunity to articulate and analyse their thinking and their practices, reconcile individual questions and issues with organisational needs, compare contexts and situations and then find meaningful patterns and search for the big picture without losing sight of particulars” (Giselle O. Martin – Knip, 2008, p 6). NAS, with a strategic outcome to develop a First Class Teaching Force, is committed to promoting a collaborative environment where teachers are put into department-based Professional Learning Teams (PLTs) so that they can gain collective wisdom and share strategies on effective teaching and learning in the classrooms. To ensure that, NAS followed through 3 central ideas by Dufour (2004) in order to sustain the effectiveness of PLCs.

Idea 1- Ensure that students learn: The shift in focus on teaching to a focus on learning is core and has led NAS to establish a blended-approach PLC so that teachers can identify gaps in teaching and ultimately meet the needs of students.

Idea 2 – A culture of collaboration: Putting teachers into collaborative PLTs allows teachers “to work interdependently to analyse and impact professional practice in order to improve results for the school”. (Dufour,Dufour & Eaker 2008, p 16)

Idea 3 – A Focus of Results: Effectiveness of the PLC must be evaluated on the basis of results. When teachers work together, they participate in an ongoing process to identify the current level of student achievement, establish a goal to improve the current level, work together to achieve that goal and then provide periodic evidence of progress.

Having these ideas in mind, NAS set to develop an awareness of the tenets of professional learning communities and reflective practice whereby teachers can experience a process that can ground a collaborative culture among them. The PLC is also a platform for teachers to explore, share and employ creative strategies to engage students in class and then to be able to use data and evidence in students’ work to determine goals, drive decisions and make progress.
2.2 Structure of the Professional Learning Community

All teachers are grouped into department PLTs which meet every week. There will be online sessions interspersed with face to face meeting sessions. Instructional Programme Heads of Department will assume the role of coaches and will facilitate the face to face discussions. The School Staff Developer (SSD) sets the agenda and posts the forum questions to set the direction for the online discussions. After each online session, the SSD will collate and summarise the key points, quoting teacher’ responses, including at least one from each PLT as a way to affirm teachers’ good works.

2.3 Framework for Ngee Ann’s Professional Learning Community

The PLC in NAS is built on the research-based Teaching for Understanding Framework (TfU), a tool to design, revise and review instruction that helps students develop understanding in the concepts taught in class. Every staff in NAS is trained by WIDE WORLD (developed at Harvard Graduate School of Education) in TfU. This has developed a common pedagogical language among the staff. Strategies such as Socratic Questioning and Artful thinking are also employed in the classrooms to encourage students to think beyond the syllabus, and then allow them to delve deeper so that they can achieve a greater understanding of the topics covered.

In using TfU as a framework, teachers are focussed on setting overarching goals, understanding goals, performances of understanding and on-going assessments (refer to appendix) for a lesson unit they have planned together in their respective PLTs.

3 Harnessing the Power of Using Microsoft Live@Edu

3.1 Using an Integrated Platform

Microsoft Live@Edu is a unified platform consisting of a suite of online applications that enable a user to view and share files, to collaborate with other online users and for easier communication. All the online applications (Live Mail, Live Messenger, Live Space, Live Skydrive, Live Groups and Live Office Workspace) are accessible by just a single account called the Windows Live ID. It is beneficial for an integrated system to have single-sign on capability. With technological advances, each day there are new sites emerging. Personal data and files are spread in different sites, making work disorganized. Microsoft Live@Edu reduces the inconvenience of having to remember many passwords by integrating all the online applications together and lets users consolidate their data and files in one place.

Windows Live Groups is a place for real-world interactive groups to collaborate online. It provides an online discussion tool for people to gather and discuss common interests. Students and teachers can easily create and invite people to join the group just by selecting contacts from their Windows Live Contacts list. People can interact and collaborate through posting announcements on the Group page, broadcasting an email to everyone, or using group chat features in Windows Live Messenger to connect informally. The groups can also have photo sharing and keep everyone up-to-date on upcoming events with a shared calendar.

NAS’s PLC has been created using Live Groups where teachers are grouped in professional learning teams based on departments and they work collaboratively on a subject unit. Besides posting their reflections and comments in the online forum, lesson plans are also posted in Live Skydrive for easy evaluation.

Below are some screen captures of the online discussion which took place among teachers during the PLC time slots which was structured into the curriculum time frame.

4 Benefits

NAS, being the East Zone Centre of Excellence for ICT, has adopted a blended delivery approach in its implementation of the PLC pilot, offering a mix of face-to-face and online interactions via the Microsoft Live@Edu platform for all teachers. The main reason is to build teachers’ expertise through the right mix of virtual and live learning.

Using the TfU Framework is one way to promote a shared professional language among teachers as they are able to set clear stages in lesson planning and execution. The framework also allows milestone checks on the progress of the Performances of Understanding in planning the lesson units. At the same time, it provides opportunities for critique and reflection on our teaching craft.

In a survey conducted on the PLC journey, 100% of teachers felt that there was greater sense of collective responsibility towards student learning and better engagement of students as a result of the establishment of a PLC. Teachers also agreed that there was greater collaboration and higher morale amongst staff.

5 Limitations

While the blended approach of PLC is able to promote school wide collaboration, there is a continual need to provide training and support to level up teachers’ competencies. As much as the Live@Edu platform has met the learning needs and provided a collaborative climate among staff, it is not available on browsers other than Internet Explorer; as such, some respondents have difficulty accessing it.
6 CONCLUSION

Ngee Ann Secondary School has adopted Microsoft Live@Edu platform to develop and create a collaborative learning environment. As the full potential of Live@Edu is yet to be harnessed, Ngee Ann Secondary School will continue to explore so as to meet the ever changing educational landscape for our teachers.

7 REFERENCES


APPENDIX

Diagram 1. TiU framework
Below are some screen captures of the online discussion which took place among teachers during the PLC time slots which was structured into the curriculum time frame.

**NAS PLC Session 0.2 (Getting Started 2)**

**Theresa**

Hi colleagues,

Welcome to the “Getting Started 2” Session 0.2 for our very own PLC online forum. We are on our way to an exciting time as we embark on the entire PLC journey. Getting familiar with the site and meeting your online colleagues will help you get right on into the PLC content when Session 1 begins.

All of us are already in our learning teams (LT). Our LT is our small ONLINE discussion group in this forum. In the last Session 0.1 “Getting Started 1”, our various learning teams have met, explored the concept of “What is a PLC?” and begin to consider what that implies about planning, teaching, and learning.

You will now find your LT in the “Discussion” part of our site and make your first post on the site in the Discussion area of the site. If you have any problem, please contact your IP HOD or me, (theresa_ha@ngeeannsec.edu.sg). To get started, please read the rest of the Session Notes below.

**Session 0.2**

Let’s begin our PLC journey!

**Due Date:** Week 8 - 13 May 2009 8 pm

**Estimated Time:** 1 hour

**Purpose:** To capture your initial thoughts about a) PLC and b) the use of Artful Thinking and Socratic Questioning in our classroom.

**Post an individual response** on the essence of your thoughts in a few sentences and ask any questions you have at this point.

Here are the questions:

1. Why do you think we should promote a Professional Learning Community?
2. How do you perceive Artful thinking/Socratic Questioning to be relevant to your teaching practice?

Remember there is no right or wrong answer. We are all learning together! All the best! :)
Professional Learning Team - Humanities

What's new with Professional Learning Team - Humanities

Lee Chin Li replied to NAS PLC Session 0.2 ( Getting Started 2) on Professional Learning Team - Humanities

"Grace wrote: Why do you think we should promote a Professional Learning Community? It is vital as it can act as a platform to cultivate reflective..."

Lee Chin Li replied to NAS PLC Session 0.2 ( Getting Started 2) on Professional Learning Team - Humanities

"ShiQi wrote: Why do you think we should promote a Professional Learning Community? A professional learning community would enable the department to em..."

Lee Chin Li replied to NAS PLC Session 0.2 ( Getting Started 2) on Professional Learning Team - Humanities

"Nora wrote: PLC is useful because 1. it enables the sharing of ideas, pedagogies 2. it also allows teachers to be more open and positive about learning from fcs..."

Lee Chin Li replied to NAS PLC Session 0.2 ( Getting Started 2) on Professional Learning Team - Humanities

"Tan wrote: Why do you think we should promote a Professional Learning Community? ! Professional Sharing for the sharing of new, innovative, refresh..."

More updates

Discussions

NAS PLC Session 0.2 ( Getting Started 2)
Last reply 1 day ago

Replies 17

Theresa
What's new with Professional Learning Team - English

Muneera Daud replied to NAS PLC Session 02 (Getting Started 2) on Professional Learning Team - English
17 hours ago
“I must say I am impressed by and extremely proud of our group. It is apparent that deep reflection and professional exchange is already taking place in our team…”

Chai Noi Lee replied to NAS PLC Session 02 (Getting Started 2) on Professional Learning Team - English
13 hours ago
“The tools provide a structure to enable one to be engaged in deeper and critical thinking that can explain, explore, diverse perspective. It also opens one’s mind…”

Chai Noi Lee replied to NAS PLC Session 02 (Getting Started 2) on Professional Learning Team - English
13 hours ago

Susana replied to NAS PLC Session 02 (Getting Started 2) on Professional Learning Team - English
1 day ago
“1. Why do you think we should promote a Professional Learning Community? Professional Learning Community=Professional learning in the context of our…”

Deepa replied to NAS PLC Session 02 (Getting Started 2) on Professional Learning Team - English
1 day ago
“1. Why do you think we should promote a Professional Learning Community? To me, the introduction of the PLC is a welcome move. As beginning teachers, we co…”

More updates

Discussions

Theresa

NAS PLC Session 02 (Getting Started 2)
Last reply 17 hours ago

Replies
15