

Insights Brief

Implementing Online Professional Learning Communities Insights from WestEd’s Blended Professional Development Model

Online professional development offers a number of potential advantages for teacher learning. Teachers in different locations can meet without having to travel—reducing costs, increasing convenience, and supporting community building among participants. But little guidance exists on how to integrate online and in-person professional development so that the two become mutually reinforcing. This brief describes insights from WestEd’s Reading Apprenticeship Across the Disciplines program that blends online and in-person professional development to support teachers in a variety of subject areas as they work to build students’ literacy skills.

BACKGROUND

Reading Apprenticeship is an evidence-based instructional approach developed by WestEd’s Strategic Literacy Initiative.¹ The program helps secondary and post-secondary teachers learn how to support students in becoming more sophisticated readers. Reading Apprenticeship’s instructional approach is geared toward helping students dig deeply into subject-specific texts and curricula. Teachers in the program participate in professional learning activities that mirror the classroom conversations and instructional routines they will use with their students.

Reading Apprenticeship Across the Disciplines (RAAD) is a version of Reading Apprenticeship that combines in-person and online learning opportunities for teachers. It begins with a three-day, in-person summer institute. In the fall, teachers participate in two types of monthly professional learning communities (PLCs): (1) in-person team meetings with participants in their own school, and (2) online PLC meetings with participants from other schools and districts.

The online PLC sessions are 60-minute video conferences with up to 15 participants. Teachers regroup for a two-day, in-person follow-up institute in the winter, and then continue throughout the spring with monthly school team meetings and online discussions. The online discussions in the spring take place “asynchronously,” which means that participants read and post comments at different times instead of participating in a real-time discussion by video conference.

The Reading Apprenticeship team developed blended professional learning models to offer more support to teachers—and at a lower cost—during the school year. The blended approach gives teachers more “touch points” with training leaders and with other teachers to support their use of Reading Apprenticeship strategies and instructional routines in their classrooms. The regular check-ins allow teachers to share challenges and offer suggestions, as well as receive support from more experienced facilitators. The Reading Apprenticeship facilitators are practicing and retired teachers who lead both the online and in-person portions of the program.

About this series

The U.S. Department of Education’s Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) grants fund evidence-based programs that prepare and develop effective educators. As SEED grantees implement, adapt, and grow their programs, they gain valuable insights that can inform the work of districts, states, and organizations working to improve educator effectiveness. This series of briefs is designed to share these insights with the broader field. Each brief describes a grantee’s perspective on the lessons learned from its implementation experiences. The briefs are part of a broader project for the Office of Innovation and Improvement to disseminate lessons learned from SEED grants. Mathematica Policy Research is leading the project in partnership with AEM and Knowledge Design Partners. This brief was prepared based on input from WestEd’s Strategic Literacy Initiative.

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Below are insights from the Reading Apprenticeship development team on implementing online PLCs.

How can online PLCs enhance in-person professional learning activities?

The blended version of WestEd's Reading Apprenticeship program illustrates a number of ways that online PLCs can enhance in-person professional learning:

- ❖ **Online PLCs can sustain and extend face-to-face professional learning.** The online PLCs provide additional touch points throughout the school year to (1) sustain the learning from in-person activities, and (2) support teachers as they apply this learning in their classrooms. When teachers begin applying their professional learning in the classroom, they may have questions or want to talk with other teachers who are taking the same steps. An online professional learning community can support them as they work through the challenges of applying new practices in their classrooms. Although these added touch points can take place in-person, holding them remotely requires less setup, coordination, and travel. WestEd's RAAD summer institute builds teachers' repertoire of strategies for teaching literacy in different subject areas, and the online PLC sessions support teachers as they start using those techniques in their classrooms. Regular online interactions can serve as a bridge between in-person activities, or a follow-up once the in-person activities are finished.
- ❖ **Online PLCs provide a "safe space" where teachers can share the challenges they face.** Teachers who are reluctant to share their weaknesses or challenges with colleagues in their schools may be more comfortable discussing challenges in online PLCs that bring together teachers from different schools or districts. RAAD PLCs encourage teachers to share both their challenges and successes. This approach aligns closely with a key principle of the Reading Apprenticeship model that is used with students—building students' capacity to express their challenges so they feel comfortable asking for the support they need to address those challenges. When teachers articulate their challenges in a safe space they build their confidence that the challenges can be solved independently.

- ❖ **Online PLCs offer an opportunity for teachers to collaborate with a broad group of peers who share a common teaching role or interest.** An online PLC can expand the pool of teachers available for collaboration and discussion. For example, a special education teacher may work in a school where there is only one other special education teacher. An online PLC can connect the teacher with a broader group of special education teachers who work in different schools, districts, or even states. Online PLCs facilitate a wider network of teachers who teach similar subjects or students and who face similar types of issues in their classrooms. Collaborating with peers who specialize in the same subject is an important aspect of Reading Apprenticeship's blended learning model because the instructional strategies for developing students' discipline-specific reading comprehension differ from one subject to the next. In RAAD, the PLCs are organized into two groups: one for teachers of the humanities (for example, English or social studies) and one for teachers of science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM).

How can online PLCs be organized to promote strong teacher engagement?

WestEd takes the following steps to promote engagement in the online PLCs:

- ❖ **Group teachers whose schedules or preferred times are similar in order to facilitate regular participation and build community.** Although online PLCs are convenient because teachers can join from just about anywhere, the online discussions do require a group of teachers to meet virtually at a specific time. Giving teachers a variety of options for days and times to join an online PLC lessens the chance that they must rearrange their schedules to participate. Before the first PLC session, the Reading Apprenticeship team creates a schedule with several time options—from late afternoon to mid-evening—and lets each RAAD participant choose the one that works best for her or him. Teachers then participate in the online PLCs at their chosen time and stay with the same group for the rest of the year. This allows teachers to become familiar with their facilitator and the other teachers in their group and build a sense of community.

- ❖ **Use a standard protocol to guide online PLC sessions to keep discussions focused and allow all participants to be heard.** WestEd uses a variety of protocols for the monthly online PLC sessions to give both facilitators and teachers a clear direction and focus for their time together. For example, Reading Apprenticeship facilitators use a “Check-in, Exchange, Reflect” protocol for teachers to share their efforts to implement new strategies in their classrooms and to ensure all teachers have an opportunity to be heard. Teachers are prompted to think about the challenges or successes they experienced in their classrooms; every teacher has time to respond and engage other teachers in a discussion about their experience; and teachers reflect on what they learned from the session. The protocol guides the interactions of the 60-minute online PLC sessions.

Check-in (5 minutes)

Team members jot down responses to two prompts:

- “Since our last meeting, what did you do to use Reading Apprenticeship approaches in your classroom?”
- “What successes and challenges did you experience?”

Exchange

- In a “whip-around,” team members share answers to the first prompt. Listening team members do not respond. (1 minute per person)
- One by one, volunteers share answers to the second prompt, engaging others in discussion and answering clarifying questions. (5-7 minutes per volunteer).

Reflect

- Team members jot down their “Gots” (what they took away from the session) and “Needs” (what they still need help with). (2 minutes)

- ❖ **Establish an environment that values and supports teachers to share challenges.** The facilitator of an online PLC can set the tone for conversations so teachers are comfortable discussing difficulties they face in the classroom. When Reading Apprenticeship facilitators hold online PLCs after the summer institute, they create a safe space for teachers by emphasizing key messages—for example, that teaching is complex; that it will take time for teachers to successfully implement a new approach; and that teachers can learn from the efforts of other teachers as they address their own challenges. Reading Apprenticeship facilitators communicate the value of

teachers’ attempts to grapple with the challenges they face in their classrooms. In addition, they start building a sense of community among participants at the in-person institutes and clarify the goals for the online PLC sessions. Teachers receive a two-page document that defines the goals, guidelines, and expectations for PLCs. For example, teachers are expected to try out Reading Apprenticeship strategies and instructional routines in their classrooms and to reflect on the impact their teaching has on student learning.

What steps can ensure that online PLCs are productive?

The Reading Apprenticeship team takes a number of steps to promote productive online PLC sessions:

- ❖ **Train facilitators to implement productive PLC sessions.** Online PLC protocols are helpful for guiding productive discussions, but facilitators also benefit from learning how to use the protocols during the PLC sessions. The Reading Apprenticeship development team works closely with the program’s facilitators on how to facilitate online PLCs. This training gives facilitators the opportunity to experience (as participants) discussions of Reading Apprenticeship instructional routines following the PLC protocol, and to review a recorded PLC session. This shows facilitators how to press for clarification from teachers in a session when needed, and how to keep the conversation focused on addressing participants’ challenges. Facilitators also receive clear and detailed guidance on the steps they need to take before, during, and after each session, including:
 - One week before each session, send out reminders
 - One day before, gather materials including names of participants
 - The day of the session, log on to the platform 15 minutes before the session starts
 - The week after each session, review and respond to teachers’ “Gots and Needs”
- ❖ All facilitators go through their own extensive apprenticeship before leading any of the program’s professional learning sessions. Their own classroom practice and experience as Reading Apprenticeship consultants-in-training have deeply familiarized them with WestEd’s core text, *Reading for Understanding: How Reading Apprenticeship Improves Disciplinary Learning in Secondary and College Classrooms*. Facilitators learn how to reference relevant parts of the book during PLC sessions and point teachers to sections that can address their specific questions or needs.

- ❖ **Give participants early practice with the online platform to minimize the time lost to technical problems.** Online PLCs require teachers to use online platforms that are typically new to them. Giving participants guided practice in navigating the online platform in advance reduces the chance that teachers will have problems once the PLCs begin. On the last day of WestEd’s RAAD summer institute, facilitators lead participants through the process of logging on and navigating the online platform that is used for the online PLCs. WestEd also gives facilitators a list of troubleshooting steps to help them resolve any issues that might come up during the PLC sessions.

About this brief

This brief was prepared based on input from several leaders at WestEd’s Strategic Literacy Initiative: Mira-Lisa Katz, Associate Director; Irisa Charney-Sirott, Senior Program Associate; and Heather Howlett, Senior Program Associate.

Jeff Archer and Jeffrey Max worked with WestEd to develop this brief.

For more information on WestEd’s Reading Apprenticeship program, go to:
<https://readingapprenticeship.org/>.

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ENDNOTES

¹ For evidence of the program’s effectiveness from the What Works Clearinghouse of the Institute for Education Sciences, see:
<https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/EvidenceSnapshot/414>.