Exploring the Challenges, Strategies, and Contextual Factors of a Professional Learning Community Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic in Thailand

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This study investigates the role of professional learning communities (PLCs) in enhancing social studies instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic in Thailand. Focusing on the collaborative efforts of three Grade-12 teachers specializing in Thai history, world history, and religious studies, the research spanned 10 months and employed a multi-method approach, including online classroom observations, meeting notes, lesson plans, and in-depth interviews with teachers, students, and school leaders. The findings highlight significant challenges, such as excessive workloads, diminished student engagement, and inequitable access to online learning. To address these issues, the teachers implemented an interdisciplinary PLC framework that integrated subject content and customized assignments to align with student interests. This strategy enhanced critical thinking, interdisciplinary connections, and active participation, while reducing academic burdens. Contextual factors such as strong administrative leadership, supportive policies, and effective use of technology were pivotal in enabling these adaptations and ensuring their success.

Keywords: professional learning community; social studies teaching; COVID-19; Thailand

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Introduction

The COVID-19 outbreak, which began in late 2019, rapidly escalated into a global pandemic, profoundly affecting nations worldwide. One of the most significant and challenging impacts of the pandemic has been on the education sector. With the virus spreading rapidly and posing severe health risks, governments around the world were compelled to close schools to protect students, teachers, and communities. This unprecedented global school closure disrupted the education of millions of children and adolescents, exacerbating existing inequalities and creating new educational challenges. The closure of schools brought to light critical issues, such as the digital divide, where students from disadvantaged backgrounds struggled to access remote learning resources due to lack of Internet connectivity and technological devices.

In Thailand, the Ministry of Education (MOE) hoped it would be over in a few months, but that did not happen. School openings were postponed indefinitely; a decision was made during a cabinet meeting on April 2023 to postpone the start of the academic term from 16 May 16 to 1 July 2023 in response to the escalating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Recognizing the multifaceted effects on children, parents, teachers, and schools, the MOE established a policy framework for managing teaching and learning under the COVID-19 crisis with the guiding principle that "learning may pause, but education must not." Under this framework, distance learning has been implemented, utilizing existing resources to their maximum potential (Office of the Education Council, 2021).

This situation has created a major challenge for Thai education, unlike any problems we had faced before. When the outbreak persisted and affected students, parents, teachers, and school staff, there were serious safety concerns (Apinunmahakul et al., 2023). Because a vaccine was not available yet, reopening schools as usual became very difficult. In situations that conducting in-person classes at schools became unfeasible, online learning was regarded as the optimal alternative for both teaching and learning.
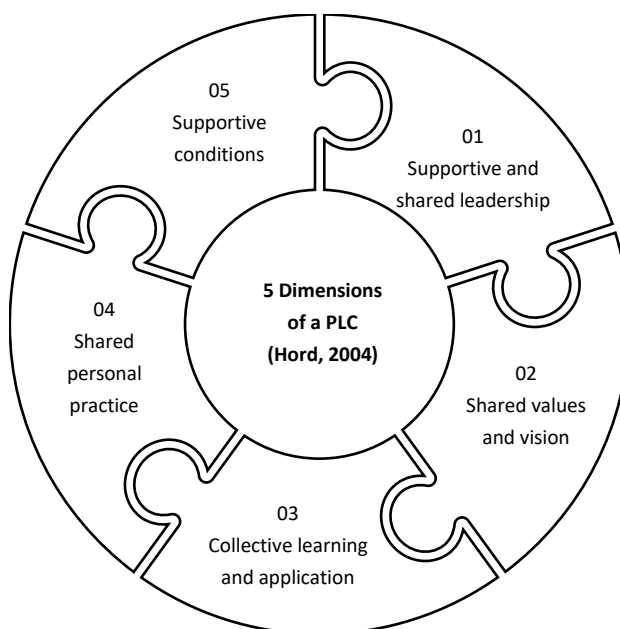
Literature Review

Professional Learning Community in Education

Professional learning communities (PLCs) emerged in the 1990s as a key framework for teacher-led professional development, garnering significant scholarly attention for enhancing teacher collaboration and continuous improvement (Gallucci et al., 2010; Stoll et al., 2006).

PLCs are characterized by shared values, goals, and responsibilities among educators to positively impact student outcomes (Hord, 1997; Mitchell et al., 2008). Five integral components define PLCs: shared vision/values, collective learning, collaborative and supportive leadership, reflective professional inquiry, and organizational support (Hipp et al., 2003; Hord, 1997). Within PLCs, members engage collaboratively in inquiry, reflection, and knowledge sharing to improve practice, fostering a culture of continuous growth and innovation (Hipp et al., 2003; Mitchell et al., 2008). Supportive leadership plays a crucial role in providing resources, encouragement, and mentoring to empower teachers, while structured collaboration time and policies for teacher development are deemed critical (Gallucci et al., 2010; Stoll et al., 2006).

In general, PLCs project identified five dimensions by Hord (2004) that serve as a framework for collaborative professional development in educational settings (Figure 1).

Figure 1:   The Five Dimensions of a PLC

Source: Hord (2004).

Each dimension emphasizes the importance of collaboration, shared goals, and continuous learning among educators. Supportive and shared leadership entails distributed leadership roles among educators, while shared values and vision align all stakeholders toward common goals. Collective learning promotes ongoing professional development through collaboration and reflection, while supportive conditions for innovation encourage risk-taking

and experimentation. Finally, shared personal practice emphasizes the sharing of effective teaching strategies and resources among educators, fostering a culture of collective responsibility for student success. Hord's (2004) PLC framework provides a comprehensive model for transforming educational practices and improving student outcomes through collaborative PLCs.

Researchers commonly characterize PLCs as a communal logic of practices that evolve from a group of interacting change agents into a form of conjoined agency, characterized by shared visions, collaborative learning, and evolving leadership processes aiming at facilitating professional dialogue and solving instructional problems (Bennett et al., 2003; Spillane et al., 2004; Wang, 2015). These shared practices among teachers provide a foundation for open communication, collegial trust, and continuous improvement (Childs-Bowen et al., 2000; Wang, 2015). Moreover, teacher-led action and leadership are essential aspects of PLCs, fostering collaborative engagement and shared learning for continuous improvement.

In summary, while team theories offer insights into key aspects of PLCs, it is crucial to consider the distinct educational context and the primary focus on enhancing teaching practices and student learning. The evolution of PLCs reflects changing roles and functions of school leaders and educators to meet the evolving expectations of the education environment. The closure of schools brought to light critical issues, such as the digital divide. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds struggled to access remote learning resources due to a lack of Internet connectivity and technological devices. This divide was particularly pronounced in rural and low-income areas, where infrastructure was insufficient to support online education. Beyond academic setbacks, the pandemic-induced school closures had far-reaching social and psychological effects on students. Schools serve as critical venues for social interaction, mental health support, and provision of meals and other essential services. The lack of access to these resources during the closures heightened stress, anxiety, and food insecurity among students.

PLC in Thailand, Online Teaching, Web-Based PLCs, and COVID-19

In the context of Thai education, PLCs are defined as collaborative gatherings of teachers within schools or educational districts, aiming at continuous mutual learning, practical research, and problem-solving to improve student learning outcomes (Office of the Education Council, 2017). This collaborative approach is seen as a means to develop and sustain quality learning experiences for students, aligning with the mandates of the National Education Act

(Panit, 2012). The Teachers' Council of Thailand has shown commitment to the enduring efficacy of PLCs, providing financial support for professional development endeavors (Office of the Education Council, 2018).

Research studying the effects of PLCs on educational sustainability in Thailand found that the program is crucial for enhancing teaching methods, positive thinking skills, and improved student academic achievements (Meesuk et al., 2021). Collaboration and idea-sharing among teachers and administrators are highlighted as key to the success of this approach in school management (Worapun et al., 2022).

While online learning is a well-established practice in the education sector globally, its widespread adoption remains limited in Thailand, primarily confined to a select group. This disparity is exacerbated by significant economic inequalities within the country. The lack of access to electronic devices and reliable Internet connectivity in remote areas prevents equal educational opportunities for all students (Talimbekas & Arifani, 2022). Therefore, the Thai government, through the MOE, has implemented various suitable learning methods tailored to the context of each school (Office of the Education Council, 2021). These methods include:

1. *Online live teaching* — This method involves real-time teaching through applications like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, and Line VDO Call Group. Teachers conduct live sessions where students participate remotely.

2. *On-demand learning* — On-demand learning involves creating diverse learning materials such as video clips, exercises, games, and electronic books. These materials are made available on platforms like MS teams, Line Groups, or Google Classroom. Students are required to watch videos, read, complete exercises, and understand the content on their own.

3. *On-hand assignments* — In this method, students are required to come to the school to collect assignments. They then study and complete these assignments on their own at home. Once completed, they return the assignments to the school.

4. *On-site learning* — On-site learning involves scheduling smaller groups of students to come to the school and learn with teachers. Strict social distancing measures are enforced during these sessions. This method is particularly utilized for students facing difficulties with remote learning.

Meanwhile, the MOE allows for flexibility in structuring teaching and learning approaches. Nevertheless, the pivotal responsibility rests with the school principals, vested with the authority to design the school's educational framework (Office of the Education Council, 2021). A critical challenge in the school process involves ensuring effective

student learning while minimizing pressure and preventing dropout rates. In this context, soliciting input from various stakeholders, including teachers, students, and parents, becomes imperative. Engaging in collaborative idea generation through processes such as PLCs facilitates collective problem-solving. This approach not only encourages active participation from all parties but also proves to be an efficacious method for resolving educational challenges.

The rapid transition to online teaching triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic has transformed educational practices and highlighted the crucial role of PLCs in supporting educators through this shift. Online teaching and learning platforms became indispensable during the pandemic, compelling educators to adapt their methods and embrace digital tools (Dhawan, 2020). This transition brought forth significant challenges, including the need for new pedagogical strategies and the integration of technology into the teaching process (Hodges et al., 2020). However, the existing literature provides limited insight into how PLCs have specifically adapted to these online environments and their impact on teaching practices.

Web-based PLCs have emerged as a vital mechanism for facilitating professional development and collaboration in virtual settings. These digital communities allow educators to share resources, engage in reflective practice, and collaborate on instructional strategies despite physical distance (Vescio et al., 2008). Yet, the literature lacks comprehensive studies on how these Web-based PLCs have influenced teaching methods and effectiveness during the pandemic. For instance, while there is evidence that online PLCs support teacher learning and collaboration (Borko, 2004), there is insufficient research on their specific role in enhancing remote teaching practices and addressing the unique challenges posed by online instruction. The COVID-19 has also underscored the disparities in access to digital resources. The digital divide has exacerbated educational inequalities, as students and teachers from disadvantaged backgrounds face significant barriers to accessing online learning tools and platforms (Reich, 2020).

Furthermore, the pandemic has intensified the workload and stress experienced by educators, necessitating robust support systems such as PLCs. Studies have shown that PLCs can play a crucial role in alleviating teacher stress by providing a platform for sharing experiences, strategies, and emotional support (Glickman et al., 2018). However, the literature does not yet fully address how PLCs have adjusted their support mechanisms to address the increased demands on teachers during the pandemic.

In sum, this study evaluated how collaborative efforts of PLCs among Grade-12 social studies teachers have been affected by the COVID-19 outbreak in Thailand. Spanning a

10-month period covering two semesters, the research used multiple data collection approaches, including online classroom observations, meeting notes, lesson plans, and in-depth interviews. The cohort of educators comprised five individuals, three of whom held instructional roles within the domain of the Social Studies Department, specializing in Thai history, world history, and religion studies. Additionally, there were also the departmental head of social studies and the head of academic affairs. The research questions were as follows:

1. How have PLCs in the school adapted and responded to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of collaborative efforts among teachers?
2. What specific strategies and practices have been employed by PLCs in the school to address the unique educational challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. How the contextual factors have influenced the functioning and effectiveness of PLCs in the school during the COVID-19 pandemic?

In this study, contextual factors were defined as the operation and effectiveness of the PLCs during the COVID-19 pandemic, including administrative leadership and support, which provides guidance, resources, and a collaborative environment for the PLCs to thrive, alongside flexible school policies allowing adaptations in teaching methods and workload management. Technological infrastructure also plays a critical role, as access to reliable online platforms and digital tools enables remote collaboration and learning.

Methodology

The School Case Setting

This study adopted case study method (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013). It allows an in-depth exploration of the challenges and strategies within a specific context — Grade-12 social studies education amid the COVID-19 pandemic in a Thai private school. This method aligns with the study's aim to investigate real-world problems in context, focusing on dynamic interactions among PLC participants, institutional frameworks, and online teaching conditions (Yin, 2018). Among these, a specific focus was on Grade 12, consisting of fourteen classrooms, receiving instruction from a team of three teachers specializing in Thai history, world history, and religion studies. After the lockdown in October 2020, the school decided on an online live teaching method.

This case study began in the second semester of 2020 and lasted eight months, covering the time span of two semesters. Online learning has become the new normal. The students participated in distance learning from home and teachers conducted lessons from their own residences.

Participants

This case was purposively selected based on its alignment with the study's objectives, as the PLCs had been actively engaged in collaborative practices addressing educational challenges during the pandemic. This approach corresponds to the "maximum variation sampling" method, aiming to capture diverse perspectives and practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The unit of analysis is the PLC group, comprising three social studies teachers, the departmental head, and the head of academic affairs. Focusing on the PLC enables the study to examine collaborative dynamics and interdisciplinary integration. The details of the participants are shown in Table 1.
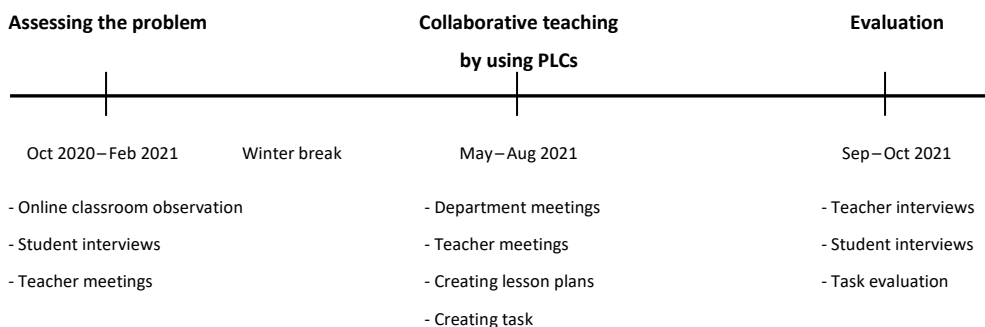
Table 1:   Participants of this Study

Code	Position	Years of Experience	Sources
Richard	Head of academic affairs	20 years	In-depth interview, meeting notes
David	Head of department	22 years	In-depth interview, observation, meeting notes
Mary	Thai history teacher	15 years	Observations, meeting notes, lesson plans, in-depth interview
Tom	World history teacher	1 year	Observations, meeting notes, lesson plans, in-depth interview
John	Religious studies teacher	3 years	Observations, meeting notes, lesson plans, in-depth interview

Data Collection

The process of collecting and analyzing data was divided into three main stages, as shown in Figure 2. First, we looked at survey data and observed how students were behaving to spot any problems. Then, teachers got together to brainstorm solutions. Essentially, we used the concept of PLCs. This meant planning lessons together and assessing student work as a team. Throughout this whole process, the three teachers received helpful advice from the department head and academic leader.

Figure 2:   The Process of Conducting Case Study Research at the School

Assessing the problem	Collaborative teaching by using PLCs	Evaluation
Oct 2020–Feb 2021 Winter break	May–Aug 2021	Sep–Oct 2021
- Online classroom observation	- Department meetings	- Teacher interviews
- Student interviews	- Teacher meetings	- Student interviews
- Teacher meetings	- Creating lesson plans	- Task evaluation
	- Creating task	

Drawing upon Creswell's (1994) qualitative research design framework, the observational phase was structured to systematically capture the nuances of students' online learning behaviors. This approach allowed for the identification of subtle patterns and interactions within the online learning environment. The observational process was grounded in established qualitative methodologies, enhancing the validity and reliability of the data collected (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Semi-structured interviews served as a complementary method for probing deeper into students' experiences with online learning. The following were some interview questions: "In your opinion, what are the most significant challenges you have faced while learning online?" and "How do you manage your time and balance your academic responsibilities with other activities and commitments while learning online?" In the collaboration by the three teachers, interview questions included: "What inspired you to initiate the interdisciplinary PLC project … for Grade-12 students during the challenging period of online learning due to COVID-19?" and "Considering the diverse nature of Thai history, world history, and religious studies, how does the PLC project encourage students to critically analyze historical events and religious doctrines, promoting a deeper appreciation for the cultural nuances of different societies?"

The approach to qualitative interviewing was the interview protocol, emphasizing open-ended questions to encourage participants to articulate their perspectives in detail. The interviews facilitated a rich exploration of students' perceptions and insights, contributing to a nuanced understanding of their online learning experiences (Seidman, 2013).

To support systematic data collection, lesson plans and task evaluation were employed as instruments. These tools were developed based on established frameworks for observing online learning behaviors. By leveraging these instruments, researchers were able to document observations in a structured manner, ensuring consistency and reliability across data collection

sessions. Additionally, Patton's (2014) guidance on qualitative research methods informed the adaptation of these instruments to the specific context of the study, enhancing their relevance and effectiveness. The study's data collection process was further enriched by structured interviews with key stakeholders, outlined in the appendices (Appendix 1: the interview questions for teachers involved in the project; Appendix 2: the questions for the department head; Appendix 3: questions for the Head of Academic Affairs; Appendix 4: the student interview questions). These comprehensive appendices facilitated a holistic understanding of the diverse perspectives and experiences within the PLC during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Data Analysis

Phase 1: Assessing the problem (Observation)

In the first phase spanning four months, qualitative methods were utilized to observe the online learning behaviors of Grade-12 social studies students. The aim was to identify and document the various learning challenges and barriers encountered by students. Formal observations were conducted during meetings led by the Head of Academic Affairs (Richard) and the Head of the Social Studies Department (David), focusing on issues involving students, teachers, parents, and other stakeholders. Additionally, observations were extended to teacher meetings within the Social Studies Department.

Phase 2: Collaborative teaching by using PLCs

Following the initial data collection, participatory observations took place during three online meetings involving Grade-12 social studies teachers. These sessions, dedicating to reflecting upon pertinent issues and collaborative problem-solving, focused on student welfare. Data, including meeting records and interviews with the Head of the Social Studies Department and the Head of Academic Affairs, were collected to reflect on lessons learned from the challenges posed by the COVID-19 situation. Discussions centered on collaborative projects initiated by teachers, the PLC, and strategies employed in response to the pandemic.

Phase 3: Data Analysis and Evaluation

To comprehensively analyze the data, a multifaceted approach was employed, incorporating diverse sources, methodologies, and perspectives. The study focused on evaluating the effectiveness of the PLC approach among Grade-12 social studies teachers in

the online teaching context. Three key steps guided the analysis: understanding student challenges through initial observations, examining the impact of the PLC through participatory observations and interviews, and conducting in-depth analysis of project development and follow-up. Data triangulation was applied extensively, critically examining challenges faced in online learning and the subsequent impact on student experiences.

Validation and Trustworthiness

The validity of the study was enhanced through the implementation of rigorous methodological strategies to ensure credibility and reliability. Triangulation was employed by systematically cross-referencing data from multiple sources, including classroom observations, interviews with teachers and students, meeting notes, and lesson plans. This approach provided a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics within the PLC, ensuring the findings were grounded in diverse perspectives.

Member checking was conducted, allowing participants to review and confirm the accuracy of the researchers' interpretations. This process ensured alignment between the findings and the participants' experiences, minimizing any potential misrepresentation of data. Additionally, an audit trail was meticulously maintained, documenting each stage of the research process, including data collection, coding, and analysis. This transparent record facilitated reproducibility and reinforced the study's methodological integrity.

Findings

This section is organized into three themes, each illuminating pivotal facets of the student experience amid the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent pedagogical adaptations.

The Challenges of Online Learning Toward the Emergence of Collaborative Teaching

As online teaching became the norm, new challenges emerged. Students had to study for long hours, deal with heavy workloads, and manage various pressures, all of which affected their outcomes. From interviews, most students viewed online learning as a problem and teachers should adjust the teaching style:

Teachers in online classes often speak very fast, which can sometimes lack the interactive and dynamic nature of in-person teaching. Some teachers make an effort to engage students through virtual discussions and interactive activities. (SIQ1 [Student Interview Question from Student 1], January 2021)

Online learning has been a rollercoaster for me. I was determined to keep my focus on academics because I want to study medicine. So, at the beginning, I was pretty motivated. But, you know, the longer it went on, the harder it became. It's tough to keep up the enthusiasm when you're just staring at a screen all day. (SIQ3, January 2021)

Many students did not attend online classes because they were not interested in learning online. The main problem is that students could not keep up with their studies because they had to study in front of a screen for many hours. In addition, issues of teaching methods and teacher assignments became obstacles to learning. In the student interviews, it was found that students wanted to study normally in classroom rather than online for many reasons:

I prefer hanging out with my friends; it's the only thing that keeps me going. Online classes? I just can't get into them. I'd rather be out there, living life with my friends. (SIQ5, January 2021)

Sometimes, I find myself staying up late to finish assignments. I've had to learn to be flexible with my schedule and prioritize tasks based on urgency. (SIQ2, January 2021)

In addition to the common problems of online learning, the specific case of Grade-12 social studies classes, the pressure to cover extensive content for subjects like Thai history, world history, and religious education, along with the stress of university entrance examinations, made the situation even more complex. In response, three Grade-12 social studies teachers initiated a collaborative project, the PLC project. This effort aimed to tackle these challenges head-on. It is a clear example of teachers taking proactive steps to make learning better for students. We will structure our findings into three distinct phases. Firstly, we will delve into the initial four months encompassing observation, school and teacher meetings. Following this, we will analyze the four-month project period. Lastly, we will reflect on the lessons gleaned from the project during the final two months.

How Teachers Create a PLC During COVID-19

At the commencement of the second semester of the 2020 academic year, the school convened a meeting with teachers to draw insights from previous online classes. Subsequently, a collective decision was made to prioritize online live teaching as the primary instructional method. During the meeting, the supervising teacher highlighted challenges arising from student feedback. A prominent issue faced by Grade-12 students was the overwhelming volume of assignments, leading to academic backlog. Compounded by the pressure of preparing college entrance examination, this challenge was particularly pronounced in content-heavy subjects like social studies. Consequently, it became the responsibility of the department head and social studies teachers in Grade 12, covering Thai history, world history, and social studies, to address this issue.

During participant observation in the meeting among the three social studies teachers, a collaborative decision emerged: to establish a PLC by integrating teaching methods and student assignments across all three subjects. The aim was to streamline the workload by connecting the knowledge from these subjects. This approach was perceived as an efficient and mutually beneficial strategy. Subsequently, this concept was introduced to the department head and supervisor-level teachers, marking the initiation of a shared vision in line with the guidelines of the PLC. From interviews with department head teacher and supervisor teachers, both of them agreed on the process:

> I firmly endorsed the implementation of an interdisciplinary PLC … [this] not only reduces the academic load but also may transform the educational experience for our students. (David, August 2021)

> The rapid shift to online learning demanded quick adjustments from both teachers and students. It showcased the resilience of our educators, who swiftly embraced new teaching methodologies and technology to ensure continuous education. So, I totally agreed with them. (Richard, August 2021)

At the end of the first semester in 2020, it was time to prepare for the next academic year. During the six months of this phase, practical plans were developed, including creating new teaching methods for different subjects and assigning collaborative projects to students. Specifically, in the Grade-12 Social Studies Department, which includes Thai history, world history, and religion studies, insights from interviews with teachers in the project were gathered to emphasize the significance of these plans:

> The inspiration to initiate this interdisciplinary PLC project was driven by our shared belief in the power of education to transcend boundaries of subjects, even in the face of challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic. (Mary, August 2021)

All three teachers adapted their teaching methods, starting by incorporating learning resources such as online museums and video clips. They placed a greater emphasis on student participation, encouraging active responses to questions. The teachers worked collaboratively to establish connections between the three subjects, aiming to enhance students' critical thinking abilities and integrate knowledge effectively. Together, the teachers designed projects encompassing knowledge from all three subjects, tailored to students' individual interests. For instance, students aspiring to enter the medical field explored the history of medicine, tracing its roots from ancient civilizations like Greece to its practices in Thailand. This exploration integrated medical treatments with cultural beliefs and religious practices, resulting in comprehensive projects.

Furthermore, the teachers encouraged online interaction among students. They facilitated collaborative discussions and idea exchanges among peers, fostering a dynamic online learning environment. Interviews with teachers highlighted the challenges posed by this approach, but also acknowledged its effectiveness in nurturing students' advanced thinking abilities while integrating diverse knowledge sources:

> This collaboration fostered critical thinking as students analyzed events from various angles, thus enhancing their analytical skills. The diversity of teaching styles and expertise brought by each teacher ensured a well-rounded education, and students were not just passive learners but active participants in discussions to a more engaged and enthusiastic classroom environment. (Tom, August 2021)

During this second phase, the three teachers proactively interacted with their students, forming a close collaboration to identify topics that could ignite students' interest, even if they were not originally part of the existing curriculum. They exhibited openness by attentively listening to their students' interests and seamlessly incorporating these elements into the learning journey. Furthermore, these teachers worked together in a collaborative manner, pooling their expertise and integrating diverse sources of knowledge. During interviews, teachers specializing in religious studies discussed challenges related to sensitive topics, sharing these experiences with their colleagues to enhance collective understanding:

> One challenge encountered during the PLC project was addressing sensitive religious topics in a respectful and inclusive manner … Collaborative projects were designed to promote interfaith dialogue and cooperation, fostering a sense of unity amid religious diversity. (John, August 2021)

The teachers insisted that sharing experiences is extremely valuable. In group consultations, the more experienced teachers played a pivotal role in offering valuable guidance. Teacher A, with a remarkable 15 years of teaching experience, provided insightful advice. Furthermore, the head teacher, possessing significant expertise, exhibited a profound understanding of social studies, particularly in the domains of history and religion, where a balance between belief and unbiased critique is crucial:

> Within a collaboration not only eases the academic burden but also nurtures critical thinking, expands worldviews, and encourages student-driven learning because they can choose the topic that they want to work with peer …   Students are exposed to a variety of ideas, beliefs, and cultural practices, encouraging respectful dialogue and understanding. This inclusive atmosphere promotes a sense of belonging and acceptance, making the subjects more relatable and enjoyable. (David, August 2021)

A significant challenge arises from the need to integrate extensive content across all three subjects, further complicated by variations in the teachers' expertise. In this case, an effective approach to integrating these subjects involves exploring the historical development of civilizations alongside the evolution of religious beliefs and practices. This can commence with a study of ancient civilizations, drawing comparisons with Thai civilization. The exploration can then extend to trace the dissemination of major religions, such as Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Judaism, investigating how these faiths both influenced and were influenced by historical events. Additionally, the interconnectedness of global cultures during the medieval and Renaissance eras can be analyzed, with a particular focus on the exchange of ideas, technologies, and religious philosophies. The age of exploration and its impact on both world history and religious practices can also be studied. Finally, a deep dive into modern Thai history and its political developments can shed light on the contemporary landscape characterized by cultural diversity and religious pluralism in Thailand.

The Contextual Factors Affecting the School PLC

The evaluation of students' assignments provided the three teachers with positive outcomes. The participant teachers firmly acknowledged the integral role of students in the learning process, considering their work as compelling evidence of the success of this project. Subsequently, the teachers provided illustrative examples of students' work addressing issues related to justice and social structure. This body of work embarked on an exploration of historical and contemporary methods employed to suppress freedom of expression, with a specific focus on the phenomenon of "silencing" the public. It contended that individuals in positions of authority have historically exploited their power to manipulate and curtail freedom of speech and diverse viewpoints. The work concluded that:

> Since the past, there have been attempts to silence the people. Block knowledge to preserve both religious sanctity and political popularity or the existence of feudal or oligarchic power. Even today the world has entered the era of democracy. But actions in a way that silences people still exist. Both in Thailand and abroad arrest of political activists. The enforcement of SLAPP [strategic lawsuits against public participation] laws or enforced disappearances by those in power should not exist in a democratic society that guarantees citizens' freedom of expression. (Student assignment)

In addition to samples of student work, interviewing students about the challenges of this assignment reflects well on development. From interviews with students regarding the work requiring integration of knowledge from all three subjects, this study found that:

> The prospect of exploring diverse historical and cultural perspectives seemed exciting. However, I was also a bit apprehensive because it sounded challenging. I knew it would require a lot of research and understanding of different topics. (SIQ1, September 2021)

While this assignment proved to be challenging for many students due to the necessity of integrating knowledge from all three subjects, some individuals perceived it as overly difficult. And this type of work may not be possible for some subjects. Addressing this perception may be crucial for teachers to consider as they continue to develop and refine this project further:

> Researching and gathering detailed information on 3 subjects was overwhelming. But the assignment we can pair with our friend. It's good, because we can discuss before we write …

I disagree with the integration of assignments for all subjects. For instance, in subjects like advanced mathematics ... But for social studies it's very useful. (SIQ5, September 2021)

Through participatory interviews, it was discovered that students' work met a satisfactory standard. The research revealed a wide range of student interests in Thai history, world history, and religious studies, extending beyond the curriculum. Topics such as music history, medicine, clothing, food, mythology, and ancient religions, although not part of the formal curriculum, captivated students' attention. From an in-depth interview with the department head, he was satisfied. He stated that:

The PLC, from my perspective, goes beyond traditional teaching methods. It creates a vibrant, respectful, and inclusive community where students are not only encouraged but also empowered to actively participate in discussions related to these subjects ... In fact, they can apply other subjects in the field such as economics, geography or civic education to combine in this project. Because Grade-12 students have knowledge enough to analyze deeply. (David, September 2021)

Upon revisiting the three teachers involved in the project, we sought their perspectives on the initiative. We aimed to understand their opinions about the project, their thoughts on recommending it to other teachers, and the challenges they encountered. During the in-depth interviews, the teachers shared their insights:

The evolution of PLC projects like this one will likely be shaped by the seamless integration of advanced technologies and the increasing emphasis on personalized learning ... Colleague collaboration was strengthened through regular sharing sessions, enriching the project's interdisciplinary approach. Feedback-driven adjustments ensured the project's continuous improvement and effectiveness. (Mary, September 2021)

Collaboration with colleagues from different departments was strengthened through joint workshops, ensuring a more comprehensive interdisciplinary approach ... By embracing diversity and promoting respectful dialogue, we nurtured an inclusive environment where students appreciated and understood different cultural and religious perspectives. (Tom, September 2021)

Discussion and Implication

Discussion

The outcomes of the PLC project underscored the effectiveness of collaborative learning methodologies, emphasizing the integration of personalized instructional techniques. Immersive experiences facilitated by virtual and augmented reality technologies played a pivotal role, allowing students to engage with historical sites in innovative ways.

Another key factor in the success of the PLC is the emphasis on shared decision-making and open communication among teachers. Regular meetings, participant observation, and mutual feedback enabled teachers to adapt their teaching methods, share best practices, and address specific student needs. This collaborative process fostered a sense of professional growth and ownership, as teachers from different disciplines were able to pool their expertise and work together toward a common goal. By connecting lessons across subjects and tailoring assignments to students' interests, the PLC model demonstrates that when teachers collaborate effectively, it not only enhances instructional quality but also creates a more dynamic and student-centered learning environment.

An examination of the five dimensions of the PLC project in the school case (Hord, 2004) clearly illustrates that the three social studies teachers successfully executed the project and achieved its objectives. They initiated the process by sharing their visions and identifying challenges faced by students across all three social studies subjects. Subsequently, they collaboratively established goals to address issues such as heavy reliance on online learning (Pinthongpunth et al., 2021). Once a shared vision and goals were established, the teachers sought guidance from the head of department and academic affairs, highlighting the significance of effective leadership. They recognized the project's importance, expressing agreement and confidence in the capabilities of the three teachers. In this context, the role of leadership is crucial (Doppen, 2004). Leaders not only provide guidance and encouragement but also instill trust in the abilities of the teachers involved, even those with limited teaching experience. This trust serves as a fundamental element in fostering collaboration and ensuring the success of initiatives aimed at improving the learning experiences of students (Chen et al., 2016).

Furthermore, the school actively contributed to enhancing online teaching methodologies by organizing workshops. These sessions were specifically designed to improve online instruction by harnessing various functions and developing educational media. This collaborative effort involved the expertise of both in-house personnel and external experts. It

is imperative to acknowledge that each facet of this support system intricately contributes to the success of the PLC.

The readiness of teachers to adopt innovative teaching methodologies and collaborate interdisciplinary is another challenge, necessitating comprehensive training programs and ongoing support. Integrating the PLC project into the existing curriculum may encounter resistance and demands alignment with standardized testing practices, calling for collaboration with educational authorities. Sustaining student engagement and motivation in a prolonged online learning environment, along with community involvement, are crucial considerations.

Implication

To adapt the PLC project internationally, it is essential to customize the framework to fit local educational contexts and cultural needs. This involves aligning interdisciplinary collaboration with subjects that are most relevant in different regions, such as STEM or civic education, while maintaining the core emphasis on reducing student workload and integrating knowledge across disciplines. Professional development for teachers is crucial to equip them with skills for cross-curricular integration and effective collaboration.

Additionally, tailoring student projects to their individual interests can promote personalized learning and greater engagement while fostering critical thinking and global citizenship by encouraging exploration of regional and global issues.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has passed, this study remains highly significant as it provides valuable insights into how PLCs can adapt to address challenges during crises, such as transitioning to online teaching and reducing educational inequities. These findings can be applied in the future to enhance teaching practices and build resilience in educational systems across all contexts, whether in normal circumstances or during potential future crises.

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Appendix 1

Interview Questions for Teachers in the Project

1. What inspired you to initiate the interdisciplinary PLC project involving Thai history, world history, and religious studies for Grade-12 students during the challenging period of online learning due to COVID-19?

2. Can you share some insights into how the collaboration between teachers of different subjects within the PLC framework has benefited students' overall understanding and engagement with the curriculum?

3. In what ways have you utilized technology and online resources to enhance students' learning experience within the PLC project, especially given the shift to remote learning during the pandemic?

4. Considering the diverse nature of Thai history, world history, and religious studies, how does the PLC project encourage students to critically analyze historical events and religious doctrines, promoting a deeper appreciation for the cultural nuances of different societies?

5. How have you assessed the impact of the PLC project on students' critical thinking skills, and what methods have you employed to measure their growth and development in this area?

6. Could you elaborate on any challenges faced during the implementation of the PLC project, and how have these challenges been addressed to maintain the project's effectiveness?

7. What strategies have you employed to encourage active participation and collaboration among students within the PLC, promoting a sense of ownership over their learning process?

8. Have you received feedback from students, parents, or colleagues regarding the PLC project? If so, what have been the most notable responses, and how have you used this feedback to enhance the project?

9. Considering the success of the PLC project, do you envision its continuation in the future, and are there any plans to expand or modify the project based on the lessons learned during its implementation?

Appendix 2

Interview Questions for Head of Social Studies Department

1. How can the collaborative efforts between Thai history, world history, and religious studies teachers within the PLC positively impact students' engagement and enthusiasm for these subjects?

2. How do you foresee the potential benefits of interdisciplinary collaboration in easing the academic burden on students studying these three subjects online?

3. Are there any concerns or challenges you anticipate regarding the integration of subjects within the PLC framework, and how do you propose addressing them?

4. How can the PLC initiative contribute to creating a sense of community among students, encouraging them to actively participate in discussions related to Thai history, world history, and religious studies?

5. What methods do you suggest for assessing students' progress and understanding within the integrated PLC project, considering the diverse nature of the subjects involved?

6. In your opinion, how can the PLC project foster a sense of cultural awareness and appreciation among students, considering the diverse historical and religious contexts covered?

7. Are there any specific challenges you foresee in terms of teachers' collaboration, and what measures can be taken to address potential conflicts or differences in teaching methodologies?

8. How do you think the PLC project can prepare students for higher education, particularly in terms of their research, analytical, and presentation skills?

9. Do you have any suggestions for incorporating real-world applications or case studies within the PLC framework to make the learning experience more practical and relevant to students?

10. What role can guest speakers or experts in the fields of Thai history, world history, and religious studies play in enhancing students' understanding and interest in these subjects within the PLC project?

Appendix 3

Interview Questions for Head of Academic Affairs

1. How has the school provided professional development opportunities for teachers to enhance their online teaching skills during the pandemic?

2. What strategies has the school implemented to ensure students' engagement and participation in online classes?

3. How are teachers providing additional support to students who may be struggling with online learning?

4. What policies and procedures are in place to maintain a safe and secure online learning environment for students and teachers?

5. How has the school-maintained communication with parents and guardians to keep them informed about their child's progress and school updates?

6. How has the school gathered feedback from students, parents, and teachers to continually improve the online learning experience?

7. In your opinion, what are the most significant lessons or takeaways the school has learned from the experience of teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic?

8. From your perspective, what are the most significant benefits of interdisciplinary collaboration between Thai history, world history, and religious studies teachers within the PLC?

9. Have you observed any specific challenges faced by teachers in integrating Thai history, world history, and religious studies within the PLC framework, and how have these challenges been addressed?

10. What role do PLCs play in supporting teachers' professional growth, especially in the context of adapting to online teaching methods and technologies?

11. What are your thoughts on the future potential of PLCs in enhancing interdisciplinary education, and how can teachers actively contribute to shaping this future within the Social Studies Department?

12. What support or resources do you believe are essential to further strengthen the collaborative efforts of teachers within PLCs, ensuring their continued success in the online learning environment?

13. Finally, how do you envision the role of PLCs evolving in the post-pandemic educational landscape, and what strategies do you think are vital to sustaining and enhancing their effectiveness in the years to come?

Appendix 4

Interview Questions for Students

1. How have you been feeling about online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic? What were your initial thoughts, and how have your feelings changed over time?

2. In your opinion, what are the most significant challenges you have faced while learning online? Are there specific subjects or topics that you find particularly challenging in this method?

3. How do you manage your time and balance your academic responsibilities with other activities and commitments while learning online?

4. What kind of support or resources do you think would enhance your online learning experience? Are there specific tools or materials you believe would be helpful?

5. How has your behavior or study habits changed during online learning? Have you noticed any differences in your approach to studying or completing assignments?

6. Have you noticed any differences in the way teachers approach online classes compared to traditional in-person lessons? How have these differences influenced your learning experience?

7. How did you feel when you first learned about the integrated assignment covering world history, Thai history, and religious studies?

8. Were there any challenges you encountered while completing the integrated assignment? If yes, could you share what they were?

9. On a scale of 1 to 10, how engaged were you while working on the integrated assignment? Could you explain what made it engaging or unengaging for you?

10. Is the integration of assignments appropriate? Should this approach be adopted by many subjects?

新冠疫情下泰國教師專業學習社群之挑戰、因應策略和脈絡因素分析

Pattawee DAENGKOMANE、陳佩英

摘　要

　　本研究探討了專業學習共同體（professional learning communities, PLCs）在新冠疫情期間提升泰國社會科教學的作用。研究聚焦於三名專門教授泰國歷史、世界歷史和宗教研究的 12 年級教師的協作努力，歷時 10 個月，採用多種研究方法，包括在線課堂觀察、會議記錄、教學計劃，以及與教師、學生和學校領導的深入訪談。研究結果突出了諸多挑戰，例如過重的工作量、學生參與度降低、在線學習資源的不平等獲取等。為應對這些問題，教師們實施了跨學科 PLC 框架，整合學科內容並根據學生興趣制訂作業。此策略不僅增強了學生的批判性思維、跨學科學習能力和積極參與度，還減輕了學術負擔。研究進一步表明，強而有力的行政領導、支持的政策和技術的有效運用等背景因素，在推動這些適應措施並確保其成功方面發揮了關鍵作用。

關鍵詞：專業學習社群；社會科教學；COVID-19；泰國

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