

# Online Communities for Educators: Guidelines for Planning and Implementation<sup>1</sup>

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Successful online communities of practice for educators utilize networking technologies to increase communication, collaboration, and support among teachers, administrators, researchers, and other related professionals and stakeholders. These communities enable educators to gain equitable access to human and information resources that may not be available locally. This access helps to reduce feelings of disconnectedness or isolation that educators often experience. Situated in the context of educators' everyday work, successful online communities facilitate informal knowledge sharing, the exchange of ideas and experiences in ways that contribute to continual professional learning, and the collaborative building of individual and group expertise. In addition to enabling members to share existing knowledge, successful online communities provide an environment for the collaborative creation of new knowledge.

A deep and full understanding of the attributes of successful communities can inform the work of practitioners who are creating and stewarding online communities for educators. Although the platform on which a community is built and the interface through which users interact are key dimensions of community design, it is important to think about community design in broader terms. The purpose of this paper is to highlight multiple dimensions of community design and offer guidelines for implementation. These dimensions include the following:

- Collective identity and clear purpose
- Leadership and effective moderation
- Opportunities for sharing knowledge, expertise, and experiences
- Governance structure and guidelines for participation
- Community sociability and usability
- Measuring success

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<sup>1</sup> The majority of content for this working paper is adapted from *Cultivating knowledge sharing and trust in online communities for educators: A multiple case study*, by S. Booth, 2011, unpublished doctoral dissertation, North Carolina State University, Raleigh.

## Collective Identity and Clear Purpose

Members of successful online communities typically share a common identity. For example, they may share the common identity of being English teachers, regional technology directors, or practitioners committed to Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Through their common identity, members share common interests and concerns related to their practice (Wenger, White, & Smith, 2009). Their unique perspectives and experiences richly inform the common interests and concerns they share in the community. Active promotion of the community and targeted recruitment of members can help to establish the community's collective identity. It is important to recognize, however, that simply bringing together practitioners with a common identity and similar interests is not enough to establish an online community of practice. The community must have a reason for its existence; it must have a clear purpose. Members need to know why they are there, how they can contribute, and what they can expect from the community. Online communities may actively address issues or problems of practice that are relevant to the daily work of educators. Their purpose may center on collaboration and content development, providing mentoring or support to new teachers, focusing on professional conversation of broader issues in education, or some combination of those purposes. Online communities can serve multiple purposes, but successful communities explicitly state and reiterate their purpose(s) to members through various channels.

### Planning and Implementation Guidelines

- Determine the target audience for the community.
- Identify the common interests, needs, and concerns related to practice that members share.
- Determine the purpose of the community as it relates to the common interests, needs, and problems of practice that members share. What value does the community add?
- Articulate the ways in which the resources, activities, services, and collaborative spaces of the community will serve the overall purpose of the community. Highlight unique ways in which participation in the community will inform practice.
- Identify primary avenues for participation, indicating ways in which they directly relate to the purpose of the community.
- Clearly state the purpose of the online community on the community website and on all promotion and outreach materials.
- Frequently reiterate the purpose of the community through ongoing communications such as weekly or monthly newsletters.
- Determine strategies for targeted recruitment of members.

### *Snapshot from the field: Clear Purpose*

The English Companion Ning (<http://englishcompanion.ning.com/>), an online community for English teachers, was created in December 2008 by Jim Burke. The community was initially created to provide support for new English teachers. Jim had just returned from the 2008 National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) convention where he had seen firsthand just how few new teachers were actually at the convention and how few new teachers were joining the “professional conversation.” In an effort to address this problem, he decided to experiment with creating an online community. What began in December 2008 as one experienced teacher’s quest to support new teachers and engage them in the professional conversation of English teachers has grown into a successful international learning community of more than 25,000 members. The community’s purpose is simply stated on the main page of the website as “a place to ask questions and get help. A community dedicated to helping you enjoy your work. A cafe without walls or coffee: just friends.” The purpose of the community is frequently reiterated in weekly newsletters from Jim. For example, one newsletter ended as follows:

Let me end this week’s letter by reiterating what the EC Ning is and what it attempts to accomplish: we are a community of professionals who come here to help each other. To that end, we have three specific goals, which you are all charged with helping us achieve:

1. Support each other, in particular the new teachers, throughout the school year as we face, individually and as a profession, challenges.
2. Improve our teaching through ongoing discussion of and reading about not only what to teach but how to teach it in ways that will best educate our students.
3. Identify and develop the next generation of leaders within our profession by encouraging them to write, present, or otherwise use their expertise to help other teachers.

## Leadership and Effective Moderation

Leadership and effective moderation are critical to the success of online communities (Bourhis, Dubé, & Jacob, 2005; Gairín-Sallán, Rodríguez-Gómez, & Armengol-Asparó, 2010; Gray, 2004). Leadership and moderation are key factors for cultivating and sustaining a knowledge-sharing environment. Forms of leadership can vary greatly from visible and daily moderation of community interactions to behind-the-scenes nudging and support for members. Successful online communities have involved leaders who skillfully encourage participation, learn about the knowledge and expertise of their members, develop diverse avenues for knowledge exchange, build alliances within and outside the community, and help to establish a cadence for community activity. Leaders of successful communities have a broad vision for the ways in which their community fits into and complements a larger network of both face-to-face and online communities. Their competence and credibility within the field enables them to establish an atmosphere of trust and more readily identify and value member expertise. Because of the important role that community moderators play in the success of the community, it is not surprising that their work requires a significant time commitment. The time a moderator devotes to leading an online community can range from several hours per day to full-time work.

In addition to the official moderator(s) of a community, core community members can also play important leadership roles. Each member brings to the community their stories, their experiences, and their tacit knowledge of practice. Through ongoing exchange of this knowledge, they develop social identities within the community. Over time, these identities may evolve into informal community roles, such as thought leaders, answer people, peacekeepers, or fans. Members' knowledge of others' expertise can be a key component in network formation. Good network formation results in networks that have increased both expertise and the potential to strategically access this expertise to enhance individual and community functioning (Coburn, Choi, & Mata, 2010).

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- Select a well-connected community leader who has competence and credibility within the field.
- Select a community leader who is attuned to the key issues, passions, and concerns of the group.
- Select a community leader with excellent online communication skills and experience moderating online communities.
- Recognize the time commitment needed to lead the community; allow for and compensate for that time accordingly.

- Increase “expertise transparency” among members to facilitate development of unique member identities and roles. Detailed and persistent profiles are one means of increasing expertise transparency. These profiles can include representations of members’ activity within the community and across communities. Opportunities for small-group collaborations provide another way of increasing expertise transparency.
- Provide opportunities for members to take on leadership roles within the community. Some leadership roles, such as spearheading the organization of a webstutute, may be short-term; and other leadership roles, such as being the community cybrarian, may extend over time.
- Identify community members with leadership potential and provide them with opportunities for e-leadership and e-moderation training.
- Offer ways for leaders within the community to connect with leaders from other communities.

## Opportunities for Sharing Knowledge, Expertise, and Experiences

The stated purpose of the community establishes its *raison d'être*. It is through the hive of activities and opportunities within the community, however, that the purpose is realized. Successful communities offer a variety of opportunities for sharing knowledge and resources, for collaborating, and for networking (Wenger et al., 2009). Busy educators appreciate opportunities for engagement that save them time or expense. Simple needs assessments enable community leaders to better target the interests and most salient needs of the group. Knowledge-sharing opportunities may be as various as informal open discussion forums and more formal collaboration, such as authorship of books or white papers. Structured conversations that center on hot topics, that are limited in duration, and that result in tangible resources, links, documents, or the like are particularly popular in online communities (Booth, 2011). Fruitful opportunities may also focus on specific problems of practice, enabling educators to benefit from the collective wisdom of the community (Duncan-Howell, 2010). Those who are developing and implementing online communities should give great consideration to building a balanced array of options for participating in the community. Although there must be multiple avenues for constructively channeling the rich array of diverse perspectives, knowledge, expertise, and experiences held by members of the community, too many options can dilute activity to such an extent that the community no longer feels active and substantive. In addition, the opportunities for engagement in community knowledge sharing should accommodate a range of participation levels. In some cases, members may want to be integrally involved in planning for or participating in knowledge-sharing opportunities, and in other cases they may prefer peripheral participation. Table 1 provides a sample of potential activities for engaging members in knowledge sharing.

**Table 1. Potential Opportunities for Engagement in Online Communities**

Design Element	Description and Sample Function(s)
Moderated asynchronous discussion boards	Begun with a topic or question introduced by a moderator or a participant and responded to by members of the community. Enables community members to provide mutual support through answering questions, sharing resources, and debating controversial issues. Often particularly valuable when starting an online COP by engaging members, providing information about their needs, and enabling their contributions without requiring all participants to be present at the same time.
Blogs	Typically, moderated forums with a single voice (or group of voices) initiating each discussion with a detailed, often impassioned statement about an issue; they also can be great vehicles to follow the unfolding of a project or story over time. Bloggers tend to offer strong opinions and seek to develop groups of followers, analogous to a newspaper editorial writer or TV commentator (as a result, blogging can work particularly well in communities of education leaders).
Microblogs, hashtags	E.g., Twitter. Essentially broadcast, asynchronous instant messaging, opening up the IM concept and making it more of a public community conversation that, in active communities, can be pushed and advanced in nearly real time. Hashtags enable Twitter users to quickly find “dialogs” of interest and access prior messages. Can support “on-the-go” involvement via cell phones and other mobile devices.
Member directories, profiles	Vehicles for users to find and learn about each other, form bonds, and communicate (semi-) publicly (e.g., via personal comment walls, news feeds) or privately. Particularly effective when users can identify colleagues with similar roles or others with specific areas of expertise. Facebook, MySpace, and LinkedIn all started out as member directories and then added additional COP functions.
Webinars	Online presentations on specific topics by one or more experts, using online conferencing tools (e.g., Wimba and Elluminate, WebEx) and/or video conferencing. Conveys information and enables synchronous Q & A and other interactions, similar to a face-to-face presentation session, with the possible addition of follow-up discussion over time.
Polls, surveys, ratings	Tools used to provide a quick sense of the overall views or interests of community members and their ratings of resources and activities. Polls, surveys, and (content) ratings provide simple, anonymous ways for users to contribute to communities, often providing a first step toward greater participation.
Resource libraries with user tagging	A wide variety of platforms enable community members to contribute resources, ranging from recommended URLs to original text, audio, and video files. Increasingly central to online community building is providing members with the tools, prompts, and knowledge to become core content providers. User tagging helps organize these burgeoning resource repositories.
Wikis, other collaborative spaces	Wikis enable the production of highly structured, usable community-based output that can be updated on an ongoing basis. Other collaborative production forms are emerging online, to support collaborative art, music, game, and virtual world creation.
Mobile applications	Mobile-optimized versions of communities facilitate on-the-go use. Through geo-tagging and other mechanisms (see, e.g., Fate in Your Hands), mobile is increasingly blurring and blending the physical and virtual worlds and associated communities.

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- Provide a range of opportunities for members to engage in the community. Options should include informal knowledge-sharing opportunities such as online discussion forums, as well as more formal opportunities such as webstitutes (online institutes) or other collaborative projects.
- Provide members with opportunities to participate in structured conversations that center on hot topics, that are limited in duration, and that result in tangible resources, links, documents, or the like.
- To increase the impact of members' experiences in the community, directly link knowledge-sharing opportunities to problems of practice. For example, provide opportunities for members of the community to engage in collaborative action research projects focused on a shared classroom-based or content-based challenge.
- Begin with a simple array of activity options that members' time can support and for which there is organizational capacity to support.
- Use a variety of outreach options to let members know about all the activities within the community and drive traffic to the community.

### *Snapshot from the field: Using Twitter to Drive Community Traffic and Conversation*

The Educator's PLN online community (<http://edupln.ning.com/>) is dedicated to the support of a personal learning network for educators. A unique aspect of the EduPLN community, and the most important driver of knowledge sharing according to the administrators of the community, is the pairing of the EduPLN with Edchat, an ongoing Twitter conversation. Twitter is a real-time information network in which participants can use hash tags (#) to join and participate in specific conversations. Hashtags are a Web tag that have the hash mark or pound symbol (#) preceding the tag (e.g., #edhat) and are used to help in adding tweets to a category. Twitter's Edchat is a conversation among educators, parents, students, and other stakeholders in which challenging issues facing educational systems worldwide are discussed. Participants share perspectives and opinions, provide resources, and offer experiences. Officially, it is conducted on Twitter twice each Tuesday. Two chats are offered to accommodate the global time zones. The educational topics are chosen from a poll posted each Sunday night or the chat may feature a guest speaker. The chats are scheduled for an hour, but often carry on throughout the week. Complementing the conversation, participants tweet out short links to let Edchat members know about resources, websites, podcasts, videos, or the like that are relevant to the topic being discussed. So why have a community beyond the Twitter Edchat? Twitter tweets are limited to 140 characters and Twitter conversations often tend to move along quickly, and thus the lifespan of a tweet is quite short and not everyone is able to sign on to the Edchat conversations. To address this limitation, the organizers of Edchat created an online community in which Edchat conversations could continue and deepen and resources could be archived for later access.



## Governance Structures and Guidelines for Participation

To be successful, online communities must develop governance structures that include policies for membership, etiquette, privacy, as well as informal norms of behavior (Beenen, Ling, Wang, Chang, Frankowski, et al., 2004; Wu, Chen, & Chung, 2009). Membership in online communities can vary along a continuum from private to public. Although private communities may allow for an increase in trust and deeper forms of knowledge sharing among members, application processes to private communities may create barriers that limit participation. Online communities that are completely open to the public offer a lower threshold for participation but can open the door to unwanted guests.

### *Guidelines for Participation: An Example From the English Companion Ning*

<http://englishcompanion.ning.com/forum/topics/ec-ning-community-guidelines>

#### Guiding Principles

- The English Companion Ning is a place “Where English teachers meet to help each other.”
- It exists to support its members, not to make money. No ads or anything for sale here.
- Members are welcome to refer and link to their own books, blogs, businesses, or websites within the context of their EC Ning posts but should not use this site to promote their own books, blogs, businesses, or websites (i.e., don’t try to *sell* us anything).
- If you were, are, will be, or do work to help an English teacher, we want you in our community.

#### Common Practices

- Post your content in the most appropriate place. EC Ning member “Clix” offers the following elegant summary of posting practices:
  - **blogs** are for stating why you teach something (e.g., classics or YA).
  - **forums** are for arguing about whether to teach something (e.g., classics or YA).
  - **groups** are for sharing suggestions how to teach something (e.g., classics and YA).
- Respect people even as you challenge, question, or disagree with them.
- Make an extra effort to support new teachers to ensure their success.
- Do not duplicate postings or discussions. This is especially relevant for the [Teaching Texts group](#). Before starting a new discussion (e.g., about *The Things They Carried*), use the search function to see if a discussion on that topic already exists.

#### Recommendations for Efficient Use

- Give each post a clear title with words people can find through search. “The Zen and the Art of Teaching” is a bit vague and would return every post with “teaching” in it. “Classroom Discussion Strategies,” while not a sexy title, will get more hits and be more helpful for those who search for “discussion strategies.”
- Consider setting up an RSS feed to EC Ning or creating an account with Pageflakes to track content on the EC Ning.
- Link to articles you reference whenever possible. This makes for more efficient use by those who read your ideas.
- Consult the [EC Ning FAQs](#).
- Add tags to all postings to improve search within the EC Ning.

Participation policies in online communities vary from tacit assumptions and rituals to formal protocols, rules, and laws that guide people's interactions (Preece, 2000). Typically, successful online communities establish guidelines for participation upfront and usually post these guidelines on the community website. Guidelines for participation often include examples of what is considered acceptable practice within the community and what is not. In addition to establishing the guidelines upfront, enforcing trustworthy behavior over time helps to build and sustain trust among community members. Members of an online community need to feel safe. Their trust in the community as an institution and their trust in individual members of the community directly impact their willingness to engage in knowledge-sharing interactions (Ardichvili, 2008). The job of enforcing the informal norms of the community typically falls to the community moderator. An ongoing part of the moderator's responsibility is to shepherd the community and keep it safe. This may be accomplished through behind-the-scenes e-mails or more visible posts to the entire community. In addition, the moderator may call on core members of the community to purposefully model good community behavior.

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- Consider pros and cons of variations along the membership continuum.
- Establish guidelines for participation in the community upfront and post these guidelines on the community website.
- Enforce trustworthy behavior.
- Call on core members of the community to model desired community behavior and interaction.
- Take into consideration legal issues, such as following FERPA guidelines when sharing student work, and incorporate these into guidelines for participation.

***Sidebar: Is lurking a legitimate form of participation?***

A current debatable topic among community developers and members involves the presence of “lurkers” in online communities. Lurkers are members of the community who observe interactions and absorb information from the community but do not contribute to the community. Active members of communities often resent the presence of lurkers, viewing them solely as “takers” without giving back to the community. Lurking may or may not be a problem and depends on the perspective from which this behavior is being judged and the goals of those making the judgment: “If there is little or no message posting in a community, then lurking is a problem. No one wants to be part of a conversation where no one says anything. Such online communities cannot survive because there is so much happening on the Internet that people do not return to silent communities” (Preece, Nonnecke, & Andrews, 2004, p. 203). On the other hand, in vibrant, active communities, lurking may be less of a problem. From a community of practice perspective, lurking is considered a form of “legitimate peripheral participation” and, as such, a crucial process by which a community can offer learning opportunities (Wenger et al. 2009). The purpose of the community determines the acceptable level of lurking.

## Community Sociability and Usability

Sociability is concerned with the social interactions that community members have with each other via computing technology (Jones & Preece, 2006). Within online communities, members need to feel the presence of other members. Social presence is the degree to which members of a community feel connected to one another (Swan & Shih, 2005). When questions are posed, responses are posted, advice is offered, or resources are provided, members need the virtual equivalent of a head nod, a smile, a thank you, or some other acknowledgment. Members on the periphery of the community are likely to become more engaged in the community if they discern a palpable social presence. Creating social presence is particularly important in the early stages of community growth. Successful communities often designate community “hosts” to welcome new members to the community and ensure that member participation is positively acknowledged. Community moderators often call on core members of the community to ensure that newcomers receive responses to their questions or contributions.

The usability of an online community is concerned with the features and functions that enable users to interact successfully with technology across the human-computer interface (Jones & Preece, 2006). Usable community software is a key enabler for knowledge sharing in online communities (Ardichvili, 2008; Barab, MaKinster, & Scheckler, 2003; Farooq, Schank, Harris, Fusco, & Schlager, 2007; Jones & Preece, 2006). The essential software components must include architecture for the information that supports the community; tools for searching the information and navigating through it; a design of the dialogue format; and access (Jones & Preece, 2006). The design of an online community must enable flexible use and support a diverse range of use. Further, there is a growing need for designs that allows content generated by the community to be archived in a way that is easily searchable and usable in the future.

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- Designate community hosts to welcome new members and facilitate social presence within the community.
- Particularly in the early stages of the community, monitor community activity to ensure that members who post receive some sort of response to their post.
- Personalize responses to posts, for example, a response such as “@Lisa, I had a similar experience with...” provides a personalized acknowledgment of a post that Lisa created and then builds on it.
- Highlight contributions from members in weekly or monthly newsletters.
- Provide acknowledgement functionality through which members can “like” forum posts.

- Provide “who’s online” indicators and activity streams.
- Enable profile pictures to be displayed with posts.
- Capture and archive artifacts of knowledge sharing among members for future use by members within the community and possibly outside the community.
- Develop efficient tagging systems and search engines for knowledge repositories.

More about community usability can be found in the Technologies for Online Communities of Practice brief, available on the Connected Online Communities of Practice website at <http://edcosp.org>.

## Measuring Success

If your online community is successful, what will “success” look like in terms of people, interactions, activities, and outcomes? How will you measure success? Often success is defined in terms of effectiveness and health (Bourhis & Dubé, 2010). The effectiveness of a community is the extent to which it has met its objectives and provided value and benefits to its members. The health of the community is typically determined by member satisfaction, level of activity, and quality of interactions. Although there is a range of evaluation techniques that can be used to monitor the effectiveness and health of an online community, it is important to recognize that the purpose and the orientation of the community should drive the evaluation strategies used to examine its effectiveness.

## Planning and Implementation Guidelines

During the planning phase, community leaders and stakeholders may want to conduct ongoing needs assessments through informal and formal interviews, online surveys, and focus groups with experts and practitioners from the targeted domain of the community. After implementation, community stewards could use site analytics along with online surveys and focus groups to continually evaluate their members’ activities, interactions, and needs. The following questions are guidelines for leaders and stakeholders to use while considering evaluation approaches:

- What are the ongoing practices and processes that contribute to the “life” of the community and that keep members engaged?
- How is knowledge being shared within the community? Beyond the community?
- Are leaders or roles emerging in the community? In what ways? How are they being cultivated?
- How are members being supported in the community?
- How are members contributing? Posting? Replying? (When? How often?)
- What are the prevalent patterns of members’ interactions?
- How much of members’ online time is spent connecting to others in the community? (e.g., reading or posting in forums, attending webinars)
- Are groups being formed? How active are they? What are they contributing to the community as a whole?
- How is design of the community affecting member use and participation? What are members’ technical issues?
- What are the emerging benefits of the community for members?
- What are the emerging cultural norms or themes of the community?
- What are members’ FAQs?

More about community usability can be found in the Technologies for Online Communities of Practice brief, available on the Connected Online Communities of Practice website at [edcosp.org](http://edcosp.org).

## Online Communities of Practice *in Practice*

Several establishing and emerging online communities for educators serve to illustrate the diverse range and powerful potential of online communities for connecting educators and providing powerful forms of sustained professional learning. The following links provide a few examples of successful online communities of practice for educators.

### **Classroom 2.0.**

<http://www.classroom20.com/>

Classroom 2.0 is an online community for those interested in Web 2.0 and Social Media in education. It was the Edublog Award winner for best use of social networking in education in 2007 and 2008.

### **English Companion Ning**

<http://englishcompanion.ning.com/>

The English Companion Ning is an online community for K–12 English teachers. It was the 2009 and 2010 Edublog Award winner for best use of social networking in education.

### **Teacher Leaders Network Forum**

<http://teacherleaders.org/home>

The Teacher Leaders Network (TLN) Forum is the flagship community for a larger network of teacher communities created by the Center for Teaching Quality. The purpose of the community is to bring accomplished educators together to work on projects, publish their writing and action research, engage in focused online discussions with national experts, and connect with education decision makers to advocate for best policy and practice.

### **Educator's PLN**

<http://edupln.ning.com/>

The Educator's PLN is dedicated to the support of a personal learning network for educators.

### **TIE (Technology Integration in Education)**

<http://tech-in-ed.ning.com/>

TIE provides a place where educators and administrators alike learn about what is happening in technology in the classroom by following the latest news in Ed Tech, sharing content such as favorite webpages, lessons, video, audio, and written content, as well as inspiring others.

**eMSS**

<http://www.emss.nsta.org>

e-Mentoring for Student Success (eMSS) supports the development and retention of beginning science, mathematics, and special education teachers through content-specific online mentoring that promotes student achievement.

**ETLO**

<http://www.edtechleaders.org/>

EdTech Leaders Online (ETLO) is a capacity-building online program for K–12 school districts, state departments of education, regional service centers, teacher training institutions, and other educational organizations to enable them to provide effective online learning programs for teachers, administrators, and students.

**Edutopia**

<http://www.edutopia.org/groups>

The Edutopia community is dedicated to connecting people who want to improve the learning process. Members are teachers, administrators, policymakers, parents, technology staff, librarians, college students, and other educators who are committed to positive change in education.

**TLINC (Teachers Learning in Networked Communities)**

[http://nctaf.org/resources/demonstration\\_projects/t-linc/index.htm](http://nctaf.org/resources/demonstration_projects/t-linc/index.htm)

Teachers Learning in Networked Communities (TLINC), an NCTAF project, [supports a network of online learning communities to enhance the progression of teacher learning from preservice through induction and early teaching and beyond.](#)

**The NSTA Learning Center**

<http://learningcenter.nsta.org>

The Learning Center is NSTA's e-professional development portal designed to help teachers address their classroom needs and busy schedule. Teachers can gain access to more than 6,000 resources. A suite of practical tools such as *My Library*, *My PD Record*, and *My PD Plan and Portfolio* help teachers organize and document their professional development.



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