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From Digital Platforms to Collaborative Professional Inquiry: A Framework for Vietnamese Provincial Political Schools

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ABSTRACT: Professional learning communities (PLCs) provide a setting in which lecturers jointly investigate professional problems and improve teaching and research practices. This study constructs a conceptual framework for designing digital learning environments that sustain PLCs in Vietnamese provincial political schools. It combines an integrative review of scholarship on PLCs, online professional learning and digital competence with analysis of five institutional and regulatory documents issued from 2024 to 2026. The synthesis distinguishes the provision of digital platforms from the organisational conditions required for collaborative learning. The framework links five design domains to a five-stage inquiry cycle, six dimensions of PLC functioning and a three-tier evaluation approach. The 2025 administrative report records 270 school-level research projects, 170 school-level seminars, 320 journal articles and 914 lecturers participating in faculty-level demonstration teaching. These figures indicate potential sources of shared professional knowledge, not evidence of active PLCs or digital effectiveness. The article identifies governance, trustworthy knowledge resources, collaborative competence and documented application as central design considerations. Its relationships are propositions for subsequent field-based validation rather than experimentally established effects.

I. INTRODUCTION

Professional development in higher and continuing education is frequently described in terms of courses, credentials and periodic training. Yet lecturers also develop professional judgement through less formal processes: examining a difficult teaching episode, comparing interpretations of evidence, testing materials with colleagues and revising practice. Professional learning communities (PLCs) give these processes a shared direction. Their defining feature is not membership in a particular department but sustained collective inquiry oriented towards improved professional work (Hord, 1997; Stoll et al., 2006).

Digital communication has expanded the range of ways in which colleagues may work together. Virtual meetings, jointly edited documents and searchable repositories can connect specialists across institutions, allow asynchronous criticism and preserve the history of a shared product. Studies of online teacher communities identify opportunities for networking, knowledge sharing and timely assistance (Lantz-Andersson et al., 2018; Macià & García, 2016). Systematic reviews nevertheless caution that a technological opportunity is not the same as an achieved learning outcome: online participation is often assessed through self-reports or platform activity rather than observed changes in professional practice (Jin et al., 2024; Wang & Hu, 2025).

This distinction is particularly relevant for provincial political schools in Vietnam. Their responsibilities combine cadre education, political theory teaching, scientific research and the review of local administrative practice. Regulations issued by the Party Secretariat in January 2026 specify organisational functions and requirements for standard political schools, including lecturers' competence in the use of information and digital technologies (Party Secretariat, 2026a, 2026b). School-level professional learning consequently involves substantive questions of curriculum interpretation, the reliability of local cases, teaching methods and the use

of research results. A messaging group or a digital archive can assist these tasks, but neither automatically creates a community in which practice is questioned and improved.

The official review of political-school work for 2025 reports substantial research, publication and demonstration-teaching activity and identifies digital transformation as a task for 2026 (Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics [HCMA], 2026). It also records uneven resources and coordination limitations. These observations make the management of shared knowledge an institutional concern. They do not, however, establish how many PLCs currently function or whether the use of platforms has improved lecturers' learning. A design framework must respect that boundary between contextual evidence and claims of effectiveness.

The study therefore addresses three questions. First, how does a digital learning environment differ conceptually from an individual platform or an institutional digital ecosystem? Second, which design conditions could support the main dimensions and learning processes of a PLC? Third, what forms of evidence would allow provincial political schools to judge whether collaborative professional learning has actually developed? The contribution is an integrated analytical model and a set of observable indicators for subsequent evaluation, rather than an assessment of an intervention already implemented.

II. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS AND RESEARCH METHODS

2.1. Professional learning communities and collective inquiry

Hord (1997) described PLCs as communities of continuous inquiry and improvement grounded in shared values, distributed leadership, collective learning, exchange of personal practice and supportive conditions. Stoll et al. (2006) linked the development of such communities to collective capacity, motivation and the quality of organisational support. Vangrieken et al. (2017) found that the label 'teacher community' encompasses diverse arrangements, making attention to participation, trust and professional purpose essential. Studies of schools as PLCs likewise show that formal collaboration arrangements do not guarantee a deep culture of inquiry (Admiraal et al., 2021).

For analytical purposes, six dimensions are distinguished: shared values and vision; shared and supportive leadership; collective learning and application; shared personal practice; supportive relational conditions; and supportive structural conditions. The distinction between relational and structural support is particularly useful in digital settings. Trust and respectful disagreement allow lecturers to expose unfinished work, whereas time, access rights and working tools make such exchange possible. Cranston (2011) identified relational trust as an important condition for professional openness. These six dimensions are a theoretical classification; the study does not claim to have statistically validated a six-factor measurement scale.

Collaborative learning also requires a recognisable practice around which members work. Wenger et al. (2002) emphasised a shared domain, community relationships and the development of practice in communities of practice. Accordingly, a PLC should be assessed through jointly identified problems, critical dialogue and the application of shared knowledge. Findings from Vietnamese primary schools indicate both opportunities for shared responsibility and difficulties maintaining sustained collaboration (Dinh et al., 2026). Such research provides relevant comparison, although the professional mandate of provincial political schools remains distinct.

2.2. Digital environments as socio-technical arrangements

A digital platform is an application or technical system that supports a defined function, such as document storage, online meetings or collaborative editing. A digital learning environment comprises the wider arrangement of platforms, content, rules, people and organisational conditions through which learning takes place. A digital ecosystem extends beyond a single environment to interacting institutions, services, data arrangements and governance structures. The concepts are related but not interchangeable: a school may possess several platforms without having organised a coherent environment for professional inquiry.

The digital competence required for this environment extends beyond the ability to operate applications. DigCompEdu includes professional communication, collaboration, reflective practice and responsible selection and sharing of resources (Redecker, 2017). Falloon (2020) similarly argued for ethical and professional dimensions of educators' digital competence. Reviews of online and blended professional development highlight the value of aligning technologies with teachers' actual needs and organisational settings (Philipsen et al., 2019). These perspectives suggest that technology should support a sequence of inquiry and feedback rather than determine that sequence.

Research on professional networks offers supporting mechanisms. Teachers can obtain specialist knowledge and assistance from wider networks (Trust et al., 2016), while networked PLCs have been associated with reported professional learning outcomes (Prenger et al., 2019). Analysis of data from STEM teachers also identified PLC participation as a partial mediator between digital professional development and instructional technology integration (Liu et al., 2024). These studies do not demonstrate equivalent effects in political schools, but they justify examining collaborative activity as the mechanism connecting digital conditions and professional practice.

2.3. Study design, documentary sources and analytical steps

The study combines a selective integrative literature review, comparison of key concepts and qualitative documentary analysis. The scholarly literature was selected for relevance to PLC functioning, digital collaboration, educator competence and the assessment

of professional development. This is a conceptual synthesis, not a systematic review with exhaustive searches or pooled effect estimates. The analytical goal is to develop distinctions and propositions that can guide field research.

Five official documents supply the institutional context: two HCMA notices reviewing political-school work in 2023 and 2024 (HCMA, 2024, 2025); HCMA Report No. 44-BC/HVCTQG reviewing 2025 and identifying tasks for 2026 (HCMA, 2026); and Party Secretariat Regulations No. 393-QD/TW and No. 396-QD/TW of January 2026 (Party Secretariat, 2026a, 2026b). The documents were considered in relation to teaching renewal, research, knowledge sharing, professional requirements, information systems and managerial constraints.

Analysis proceeded in four connected operations. The principal concepts were first distinguished. Next, the literature was used to identify conditions and processes associated with collaborative professional learning. The official documents were then examined for reported activities, priorities and constraints. Finally, those observations were related to the six PLC dimensions to specify five design domains, a recurring learning cycle and observable evaluation evidence. Numerical statements remain attributable to administrative reports. No lecturer surveys, interviews, observations or experiments were undertaken, and no causal relationship was estimated.

III. RESULTS AND PROPOSED DESIGN FRAMEWORK

3.1. Institutional activity as a potential knowledge base

HCMA (2026, pp. 11-12) reports two ministerial-level, 60 provincial-level and 270 school-level research projects during 2025. It records 170 school-level scientific seminars, 320 articles published in domestic and international journals and 222 issues of the political-school system's theoretical and practical information bulletin. Demonstration teaching involved 914 lecturers at faculty level, while 291 lecturers participated in school-level teaching excellence activities. The report also gives 1,296 participations in professional, pedagogical and research training courses. These totals describe system-wide activities and may include different categories of participation; they are not counts of digital PLCs or estimates of unique active members.

Table 1. Selected professional activities reported for provincial political schools in 2025

Activity	Reported volume	Potential professional-learning resource	Evidence not supplied
School-level research projects	270	Study designs, reports and research cases	Extent of collaborative digital reuse
School-level scientific seminars	170	Working papers and documented critique	Quality of discussion or subsequent change
Articles in scientific journals	320	Research findings and scholarly networks	PLC co-authorship or shared revision
Issues of the system bulletin	222	Practice-based materials and local evidence	Who accessed or applied the materials
Faculty-level demonstration teaching	914 lecturers	Lesson plans, observations and feedback	Number of revision cycles or outcomes
School-level teaching competitions	291 lecturers	Teaching examples and peer assessment	Sustained PLC participation

Source: HCMA (2026, pp. 11-12). Figures are system-wide administrative totals; none measures PLC effectiveness.

Each reported activity offers a possible starting point for shared inquiry. A seminar can provide a question and competing interpretations; a demonstration lesson may generate peer observations; a research project may offer methods and findings to be examined by colleagues. Yet the published totals say nothing about subsequent critique, revision or reuse. They establish the existence of professional work that could be connected digitally, not the quality of any established community. Official notices in 2024 and 2025 also emphasised methodological renewal, exchange of experience, research and wider use of information technology (HCMA, 2024, 2025). The 2026 review identifies coordination difficulties and uneven conditions among institutions (HCMA, 2026, pp. 13-15). These observations support the need for flexible arrangements rather than a uniform platform prescription.

3.2. Five mutually dependent design domains

The first domain is governance and professional direction. A school should identify priority problems that warrant joint examination, clarify responsibility for content quality and allocate time for members to learn together. Direction is necessary because shared products may influence teaching and research; however, lecturers also need a meaningful role in selecting questions and evaluating proposed solutions. A community governed solely through counts of meetings or uploads risks becoming an administrative channel rather than a setting for inquiry.

The second domain is infrastructure and functional platforms. An appropriate combination may include secure document storage, meeting and discussion facilities, collaborative editing, feedback records and reliable access. Selection should follow the task. When a group revises a political theory lecture, version history and contextual comments may be more useful than a separate social network. Inter-school work also depends on permissions, reliable identification of participants and workable schedules. Blended arrangements remain valuable where observation and critical discussion benefit from face-to-face interaction (Philipsen et al., 2019).

The third domain is shared digital resources and knowledge stewardship. Lecture plans, verified policy materials, research outputs, local cases and written peer feedback should be retrievable with adequate attribution. Source provenance, version control, reuse rights and differentiated access prevent a repository from becoming an uncurated collection. Research on digital preservation in Vietnamese cultural heritage, although in another field, similarly draws attention to the continuing management of authentic resources and technological limitations (Phuong, 2026). The cross-sector relevance concerns stewardship principles, not empirical evidence about lecturer PLC performance.

The fourth domain is the joint development of digital and collaborative competence. Effective participants need to interpret sources, co-author professional materials, make academically useful comments and assess whether technical tools help solve a substantive problem. Peer mentoring can connect lecturers with different strengths in technology and subject knowledge. Research on improving practical teaching in a different discipline offers a limited parallel for linking professional development to concrete changes in instructional design (Tran, 2024). It cannot establish the success of digital communities in political schools.

The fifth domain is a culture of exchange and professional networks. Trust makes it possible to share incomplete work, accept critical review and resolve disagreement on evidential grounds. Contacts with other political schools, research institutions and practitioners can enlarge the range of cases and expertise available for learning. The value of these networks depends on well-defined professional questions and responsible handling of information. Digital access alone does not establish mutual confidence, and collegiality alone does not guarantee time or resources for sustained inquiry (Cranston, 2011; Stoll et al., 2006).

These domains are interdependent. Governance determines whether a group has an intelligible purpose; infrastructure and stewardship determine what members can access; competence affects the quality of analysis; and relational conditions affect willingness to contribute and be criticised. A technically simple environment may sustain valuable inquiry when all these elements are aligned. Conversely, a well-funded platform may remain a passive archive when the institutional arrangements do not support reflection, feedback and application.

3.3. The collaborative inquiry cycle

The operating mechanism is a five-stage cycle. Members first define a specific professional problem and its initial evidence. They then examine sources and experience together, explicitly distinguishing confirmed information from interpretation. Third, they co-design an improved lesson, case, research instrument or procedure. Fourth, they apply the result in a suitable professional setting and gather feedback. Finally, they compare the revised product with its earlier version, retain the rationale for changes and identify further questions. Repetition of the cycle creates a potential route from individual expertise to shared organisational knowledge.

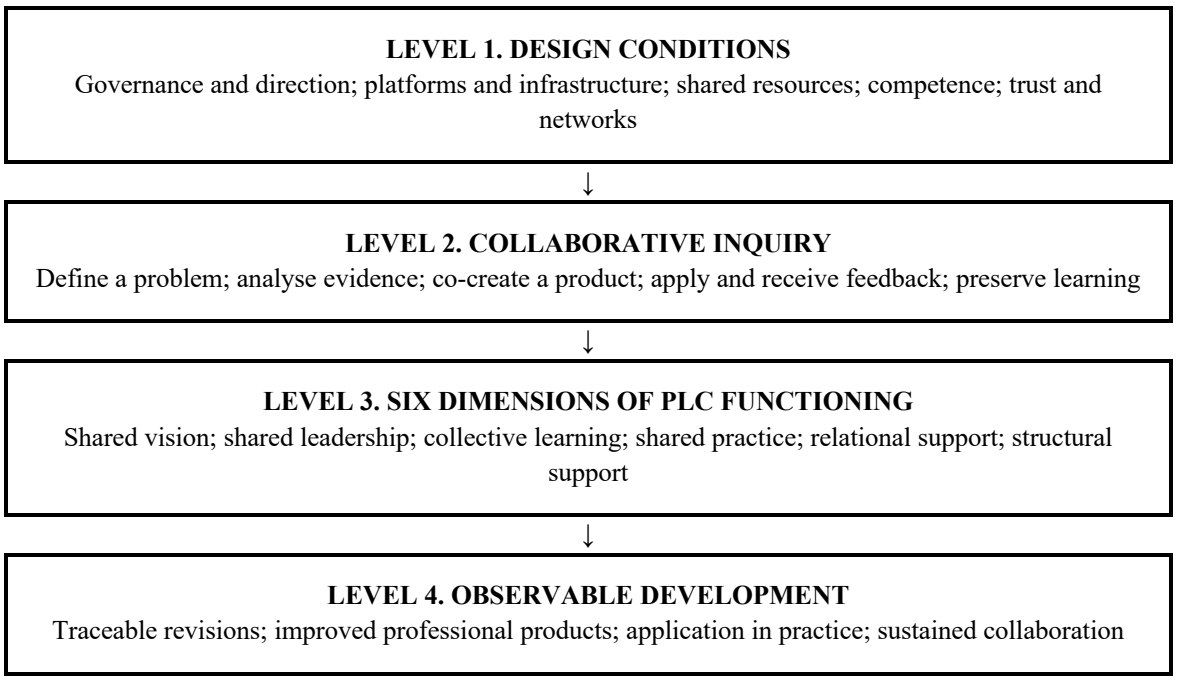


Figure 1. A four-level conceptual logic for digitally supported professional learning communities. Source: Author synthesis of PLC scholarship and the institutional documents examined. Arrows represent proposed relationships.

A hypothetical example illustrates the mechanism. Lecturers preparing a module on local administrative practice might jointly select a case, assess the reliability of its sources, produce teaching materials, use those materials in class and then revise them after peer observations. A digital environment would contribute through controlled source access, shared editing and a recoverable record of feedback. This is an illustration of the proposed framework, not a classroom intervention observed in the present study. It demonstrates why use statistics alone cannot show whether professional learning has occurred.

3.4. Mapping digital conditions onto PLC functioning

The six PLC dimensions describe how the community functions, whereas the five design domains concern the environment around that work. Table 2 connects each dimension with practical enabling conditions and observable forms of professional evidence. The mapping is interpretive and should be examined empirically before it is used as a validated rating instrument.

Table 2. PLC dimensions, supporting conditions and observable evidence

PLC dimension	Relevant enabling conditions	Evidence appropriate for evaluation
Shared vision and values	Agreed goals, reliable sources, governance	Common inquiry questions and applied standards
Shared and supportive leadership	Member participation, coordination, review rules	Lecturers propose topics and lead substantive critique
Collective learning and application	Joint analysis, digital competence, accessible resources	Products co-designed and tried in practice
Shared personal practice	Feedback tools, version control, trust	Traceable revisions of teaching or research work
Supportive relational conditions	Respectful disagreement and mutual support	Constructive critique and peer assistance
Supportive structural conditions	Protected time, tools, permissions and resources	Sustained participation and dependable access

Source: Conceptual mapping informed by Hord (1997), Stoll et al. (2006) and Vangrieken et al. (2017).

One tool may support several functions: shared editing enables collective analysis and exchange of practice, while moderated discussion can strengthen leadership and constructive disagreement. These outcomes still depend on substantive engagement rather than technical availability.

3.5. Evaluating access, learning processes and outcomes

Evaluation should distinguish access from collaboration and collaboration from improvements in work. Three tiers are proposed. The first concerns whether members have time, resources, permissions and usable tools. The second examines the quality of inquiry, contributions, feedback and joint revision. The third looks for application, improvement and continuity. Metrics such as log-ins and document uploads may be useful at the first tier but should not be presented as proof of a PLC's professional value (Jin et al., 2024; Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2021).

Table 3. A three-tier approach to evaluating digital professional learning

Evaluation tier	Primary question	Possible indicators and records
Access and governance	Are the conditions for inquiry available?	Time allocations; availability of platforms; permissions; resource reliability
Collaborative process	Is evidence examined and knowledge co-created?	Peer observations; substantive comments; document revision histories; distribution of contributions
Professional outcomes	What changes have been applied and maintained?	Comparisons of products; records of use; follow-on cycles; documented reuse

Source: The author's conceptual framework. The indicators are proposed for future validation.

Feedback studies outside formal educational PLCs provide a methodological reminder that communication volume is not equivalent to a meaningful response from participants (Phuong & Lam, 2025). The analogous question for political schools is whether lecturers examine comments and change professional products in response. Evaluation can combine short member accounts with discussion records, annotated document histories and evidence from actual use. The framework proposes categories for such observation without claiming that their reliability, validity or weights have already been established.

IV. DISCUSSION

4.1. From digital access to demonstrable professional learning

The central distinction is between enabling collaboration and demonstrating improved practice. The mechanisms of digital professional learning depend on technological, organisational and individual conditions (Wang & Hu, 2025). This framework treats inquiry as the link between digital arrangements and PLC functioning; the documents provide context, not confirmation of effectiveness.

This distinction changes the appropriate unit of evaluation. An institution-level count of platforms, projects or seminars does not reveal how a community works. A more informative unit is a traceable episode of professional inquiry: what problem was selected, what evidence was considered, who contributed, what product was revised and how the revision was used. The resulting record can be examined for the quality and distribution of participation as well as for changes in the product. This approach is consistent with critiques of broad checklists for professional development, which warn against treating attractive programme features as demonstrated causes of learning (Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2021).

4.2. Institutional responsibility and professional autonomy

Political schools combine academic activity with institutional obligations relating to accuracy, authorised dissemination and the protection of sensitive information. A collaborative environment therefore needs clear boundaries for access, contribution, attribution, review and archiving. An indiscriminate requirement to publish all materials openly would be inappropriate. Equally, highly restrictive rules could prevent the critical exchange on which a PLC depends. A proportionate approach identifies categories of materials, specifies relevant authorisation and retains enough feedback history for professional accountability.

Leadership must also make room for professional judgement. Managers can establish time, policy and infrastructure, but substantive inquiry requires lecturers to identify real problems and determine whether a revision improves teaching or research. The role of school leadership is therefore to enable disciplined learning, not only to certify activity. Evidence on school-based PLCs and teachers' online networks supports the relevance of organisational commitment, member motivation and mutually supportive relationships (Admiraal et al., 2021; Prenger et al., 2019). The applicability of these conditions in political schools remains a question for direct study.

4.3. Implementation and future examination of the framework

Implementation can begin with a small number of groups addressing clearly defined teaching or research problems. A pilot might use existing secure tools, agree on a simple procedure for checking sources and recording revisions, and complete a full five-stage cycle. Evaluation would compare the initial and revised professional products, examine feedback quality and identify practical barriers. Only then would broader investment in platforms or inter-school networks be warranted. This sequencing is consistent with the argument that educational objectives should guide decisions about technology (UNESCO, 2023).

The analysis remains limited by selective literature coverage, administrative rather than lecturer-level evidence, and untested relationships. Subsequent research could refine indicators through expert review and multi-school pilots combining interviews, observation, document histories and comparable professional tasks. Longitudinal evidence would help determine whether gains in collaborative practice persist, with attention to participation costs and differences in institutional conditions.

V. CONCLUSION

A digitally supported professional learning community is more than a set of online tools or an archive of teaching and research materials. It is an organised process through which lecturers can jointly examine evidence, revise professional work and sustain shared inquiry. Drawing on PLC scholarship and official documents concerning Vietnamese provincial political schools, this study specifies five environmental design domains, a five-stage inquiry cycle, six dimensions of PLC functioning and a three-tier evaluation approach. Reported professional activity in 2025 indicates possible resources for such work but cannot demonstrate its effectiveness. The framework places the quality of collaborative processes and the traceability of changed practice at the centre of institutional design and subsequent empirical evaluation.

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