

# Professional Development:

## A great way to avoid change

---

Peter Cole

Published by IARTV, Melbourne, Dec 2004 Seminar Series No 140.

This paper develops themes presented in various workshops and conferences by the author. It seeks to establish a new language and focus for teacher professional learning.

## Introduction

This paper seeks to provoke readers to reflect on the value of typical professional development practices undertaken by schools. Its intent is to broaden the discussion about what constitutes effective professional development and to offer some practical approaches that schools might explore in order to make the professional learning opportunities provided to teachers more meaningful and fruitful.

It is structured around ten ‘contentions’ that challenge how teacher professional development is perceived and operationalised in schools. These contentions are that:

1. much of what is termed ‘professional development’ develops no one
2. what we understand as ‘professional development’ needs to be broadened.
3. professional learning rather than professional development is a more helpful construct to drive teacher improvement
4. the place for most authentic teacher learning is the school
5. teachers generally avoid using the most effective means for promoting professional learning within the school - classroom observation, feedback and lesson study
6. school leaders need to take more responsibility for establishing a professional learning culture within the school
7. generally it is teams, not individuals, who change schools
8. individual professional learning plans should start with identifying the teacher’s change intentions
9. greater clarification of the support teachers actually need to implement changes is required
10. development plans need to be practical, action-focused and time-bound.

It asks and provides answers to questions such as:

- What is professional development?
- What is the purpose of professional development?
- How effective is teacher professional development?
- What forms can teacher professional development take?
- What seem to be the most productive forms of teacher professional development?
- What can be done to improve the link between professional development and changed classroom behaviour by teachers?

The views expressed are derived from the personal observations and reflections of the author and the practices that he has developed over several years in an attempt to make professional development planning and practice more effective. They stem from the author’s observation that millions of teacher hours and education dollars are wasted on teacher professional development as the form of professional development that most teachers indulge in is the least effective for promoting changed teacher behaviour in the classroom.

A constant theme running through this paper is that teacher professional development as it is generally conceived and practised has had little impact on improved student learning.

## **PART 1: What is the problem?**

### **Contention 1: Much of what is termed ‘professional development’ develops no one.**

Professional development has been described as the systematic and formal attempts to advance the knowledge, skills and understanding of teachers in ways that lead to changes in their thinking and classroom behaviour<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, as one evaluator<sup>2</sup> observes, education systems ‘have committed vast resources to professional development programs in the belief that participation of teachers in these programs would result in an enhancement of individual practice and in schooling outcomes for students’.

The general purpose of training is to improve the performance of individuals and organisations. The results of training should be immediate, specific and measurable in terms of how well it has met its purpose of producing improved performance. The purpose of teacher professional development is to improve the quality and consistency of teaching so that student learning is improved. The effectiveness of teacher development programs and strategies thus should be measured by individual teacher improvement and by improved school performance which results from the effects of accumulated teacher improvement.

If the purpose of professional development is to support teachers to be more effective in promoting student learning then one would assume that the focus of professional development would overwhelmingly be on how to be a better teacher. However, it appears that most ‘PD’ focuses on the why and what to change and not on participants learning how to implement improvements. To state this another way, most formal training (professional development) is development for performance (acquire knowledge, skills, attitudes necessary before changes can be made) rather than development of performance (professional learning to support a change in practice).

If one accepts that to ‘develop’ one must at some point show evidence of learning by doing something differently, then most formal professional development does not develop anyone<sup>3</sup>. At best, it leads to an awareness that change is needed or an awareness of the kinds of changes that are needed - it is a preparation for development. Whilst this may be a necessary precursor to change, have we developed if we are better prepared to change our practice but ultimately do nothing to change our practice? And if we keep attending sessions that keep preparing us for change and we go on avoiding change, does it matter? Given the amount of teacher time and of resources committed to professional development, and the need for more effective classroom practice one would assume a

---

<sup>1</sup> Fenstermacher, G. and Berliner, D. (1983) *A conceptual framework for the analysis of staff development*, Santa Monica, California: Rand.

<sup>2</sup> Dunlop, R. (1990) *Professional development: a review of contemporary literature*, Research Services, Division of Curriculum Services, Department of Education, Queensland.

<sup>3</sup> The poor transition from external courses to the classroom is discussed in Bredeson, P. and Scribner, J. (2000) A statewide professional development conference: useful strategy for learning or inefficient use of resources, *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, February 21, vol. 8, no. 13.

closer correspondence between professional development and changed behaviour was imperative.

One of the key reasons that transference from formal training to changed practice in the classroom is extremely low is that the nature of the professional learning experiences generally provided and attended are ones that are not aimed at supporting classroom change or that do little to assist teachers change. Another reason is that despite the dozens of ways that teachers can improve their professional learning, one particular method - external programs delivered by experts - has emerged supreme and blinded teachers to other learning opportunities to such an extent that very often the words professional development are seen to be synonymous with this form of learning. That this has happened is not surprising as it this model that over the decades education systems have usually adopted as the means for delivering professional development. They have also established and published good principles of professional development when what they have really produced are good principles for professional development training programs. One change that needs to occur is to break this automatic linking of a professional development need to a training program solution. Which brings us to Contention 2.

**Contention 2: What we understand as ‘professional development’ needs to be broadened.**

Box 1 below describes a range of activities that are generally considered to be part of the suite of possible professional development options. However, if professional development is a process that leads to improved teaching and student outcomes, the content and style of most of these activities are very unlikely to meet this purpose.

A government briefing on a new policy direction, inevitably labelled as a professional development activity and delivered state-wide, is simply an information giving session. National conference attendance exposes participants to a wide range of ideas and viewpoints but presentations, at best, are rarely concerned with anything other than development for performance. Whilst several of the other activities are clearly not concerned with improved classroom performance, at least the potential for this to happen is provided in the latter two examples. Whether or not these activities actually assisted in promoting changed classroom practice would depend on what took place and the context that was framing the teacher’s participation in these activities.

Box 1 also provides an illustration of the confusion that exists between training and education. It is generally the case that providers of ‘professional development’ are basing their activities on an educational rather than a training paradigm. That is, they are offering programs that have broad, long-range objectives that are hard to quantify in terms of specific behavioural outcomes rather than programs that seek to bring about specific, immediate and measurable/observable improvements in classroom behaviours. Development programs that are not designed to deliver measurably improved teacher performance but seek to promote longer term broad intellectual growth are educational

programs. As such they are usually very ineffective in producing observable improved classroom performance.

*Box 1: What do we mean by 'professional development'?*

- Is it a government briefing on new curriculum?
- Is it attendance at a national conference to hear presentations on a broad range of topics?
- Is it participation in a higher degree course?
- Is it a workshop on how to promote the school?
- Is it a visit to another school?
- Is it what takes place on a curriculum day?

If professional development is understood to be a formal, external training (or educational) activity, then this limits teachers' perceptions of learning possibilities. However, if professional development is understood to be teacher learning that arises as part of personal reflection, professional interaction and external input then this significantly broadens the perceived range of development options.

If it is acknowledged that an improvement in teacher practice signals that a teacher has developed professionally then it is also possible to contend that any action that improves teachers' effectiveness at promoting student learning is professional development<sup>4</sup>. When cast in this light, it seems obvious that improved teacher practice can result from a broad range of activities and events including self learning as well as learning from others. A formal, expert-delivered and externally provided training program is but one of many learning opportunities available to teachers. One change that needs to occur is for teachers to be made more aware of the range of development options available to them, how these will assist their development and be supported by their schools to participate in activities that are likely to provide different outcomes to those generally derived from the ubiquitous training program.

A reconceptualisation of professional development and a consequential change of practice in relation to professional learning are needed in order to redress some common misconceptions about what professional development is. The misconceptions described in Box 2 below are explored in the discussion that follows about the need to change professional development practice.

*Box 2: Some misconceptions about professional development training*

Professional development:

- is delivered by an expert
- is a training event or activity
- is delivered beyond the school

<sup>4</sup> This overstates the case somewhat, as teacher effectiveness can also be improved by actions that are usually not identified as being 'professional development'. These include various 'personnel performance management' actions such as improved staff deployment methods, improvements in the descriptions of position roles and expectations and performance appraisal.

- is costly and time consuming
- is a necessary disruption to teaching
- results in improved teaching and learning.

**Contention 3: Professional learning rather than professional development seems a more helpful construct to drive teacher improvement.**

When running an information session on the ideas contained in this paper, I was struck by the difficulty teachers had in conceiving professional development as anything other than something you went out to do. As the term ‘professional development’ and its equation with a training program seems to have imprinted itself on most teachers brains further use of this term is probably an inhibitor to the advancement of broader and more effective learning and development strategies within schools. It is a term that has reached its use by date.

Another change that would assist to reveal the possibilities for teacher development would be a better labelling of activities that teachers are invited to attend. Activities designed as briefing or information giving sessions should be advertised as such and not as professional development activities. Familiarising teachers with new curriculum policies is not professional development, it is merely information dissemination.

Whilst the term professional learning has been around for many decades it has only fairly recently become part of teacher discourse. As the concept of professional learning carries little baggage and is seen to be a more embracing term, it provides a better starting point for discussions about ways to improve teacher effectiveness. Professional learning can occur in many ways that are often not thought of as professional development. The emphasis on learning rather than development also enables one to open up discussions as to how learning takes place. How do students learn? How do we learn new knowledge and skills and how to apply them? Obvious ways of learning are being told and listening, reading and reflecting, observing and asking. Interactions and activities based on these actions can contribute to building teacher effectiveness.

We can also enhance or consolidate our learning by further reading, initiating discussions and questioning, seeking demonstrations and doing and reflecting. These actions can occur in a wide variety of formal and informal circumstances and situations and can be managed by the learner rather than done to the learner. The use of the term professional learning thus broaden one’s perceptions of the avenues available for learning as professional learning embraces both learning acquired through ‘professional development’ activities and activities designed to guide improved performance such as mentoring, coaching, formal appraisal and colleague feedback. The term also helps to situate the teacher/learner rather than the development program at the centre of the action.

#### **Contention 4: The place for most authentic teacher learning is the school.**

When one considers the accumulated experience and expertise within a school and the limited use by teachers of professional learning strategies that tap this rich vein of practical experience one cannot feel dismayed by the wasted opportunities for teacher learning.

It has been suggested<sup>5</sup> that the strength of workplace learning is that it links learning to problems, allows teachers to see, practice and gauge the effects of new strategies and to familiarise students to new ways of learning.

If the purpose of professional learning is to improve the quality and consistency of teaching so that student learning is improved then it stands to reason that those people who know most about a particular teacher's needs, about their teaching context and about their students probably have most to offer in terms of practical advice and support. Professional competence and the application of new professional learning is enhanced when the learning takes place in context and improves one's micro and specific teaching skills rather than one's generic teaching skills.

Day to day professional interaction with colleagues (i.e. workplace/school-based learning) generally provides the greatest opportunity for having one's micro and specific learning needs met. Learning in such settings enables the learner (teacher) to state and restate the learning needs they have and the teacher (colleague) to continually adjust advice, demonstrations and feedback to meet the learner's changing needs. That is, the school and one's colleagues within the school provide the conditions for a more authentic learning experience and one that is more likely to result in changed classroom practice than does an experience designed for and delivered to a 'generic' audience drawn from a wide range of school settings and contexts.

To restate the case, authentic professional learning is more likely to occur in a school setting involving colleagues than a setting involving an expert and delivered away from the school as the former learning opportunities:

- are not structured around pre-specified content (as is a conference presentation)
- are context and individual sensitive and driven the learners individual learning needs
- can be spread across a range of teachers/colleagues thereby enabling the learner to be exposed to a range of opinions and approaches grounded in a shared experience of the school
- offer possibilities for continuous learning, for trial and error, for sharing and stewardship
- enable 'workers' to alternate between being taught by and learning from peers and being a teacher (instructor, mentor, coach or demonstrator) and teaching peers.

---

<sup>5</sup> Hawley & Valli (2000) Research Bulletin No. 27, Phi Delta Kappa Centre for Evaluation, Development and Research.

Conversely, avenues for professional learning other than school-based learning are generally more costly and disruptive to one's teaching, are offered sporadically and thus are less accessible, are context insensitive and are supply driven (i.e. you take what is offered).

**Contention 5: Teachers generally avoid using the most effective means for promoting professional learning within the school - classroom observation, feedback, lesson study.**

An effective means for improving one's teaching is to visit highly effective classrooms and observe other teachers at work and to receive visitors who provide feedback on one's teaching. Another effective means is to engage in a lesson study activity whereby a teacher works with a colleague to develop, refine and 'perfect' a lesson. Both strategies are designed to improve the quality of the teaching and learning in the classroom. The first strategy focuses on improving the behaviours of the teacher, whilst the lesson study focuses on identifying the qualities of an effective lesson. Both contribute to improved learning experiences for students and both can be embarked upon at any time provided there is agreement amongst teachers to work in this way.

Whilst it is easy to assert that teacher facilitated and school-located professional learning focussed on classroom practice is most likely to improve classroom teaching, opportunities of this kind are rarely experienced in most schools<sup>6</sup>. Indeed, it is likely that few teachers currently would agree that their school and colleagues present as the most effective sources for meeting their professional learning needs. This is understandable as most teachers:

- are still equating 'professional development' with an external training activity and devalue or do not see the potential in other professional learning opportunities
- feel reluctant to call upon their colleagues for assistance as it exposes a professional 'weakness'
- feel reluctant to offer to help colleagues as this implies that they feel they are superior to their colleagues or because they feel they have nothing useful to offer
- do not see that part of their professional role should be to contribute to the learning of other teachers within their school
- do not have the time to visit another teacher's classroom to acquire skills or to observe practice and offer feedback
- are in schools where there is not a culture of vibrant teacher discourse, debate and disclosure about pedagogy and a commitment from all teachers to engage in mutually supportive activities designed to continually improve their teaching effectiveness

---

<sup>6</sup> A South Australian survey in 2003 revealed that of professional development activities experienced by teachers only 3-4% involved classroom demonstration and 2-4% involved peer observation and feedback. Owen. S. (2003) School-based professional development – building morale, professionalism and productive teacher learning practices, *Journal of Education Enquiry*, Vol. 4, No. 2, pp. 102-128.

- do not feel they are skilled and engaging demonstrators, presenters, mentors or coaches (despite the fact that they perform these roles in their classes daily)
- are not in a school where the culture encourages visits to each others' classrooms, team teaching and colleague feedback about one's lesson structure and pedagogy

Nevertheless, these factors are not insurmountable<sup>7</sup> and provide an initial list of the areas that should be worked on to make schools optimal professional learning workplaces in which learning arises from and feeds back into daily experience and where professional learning is considered to be part of one's ongoing work. Some strategies for managing the introduction of lesson study and teacher observation and feedback within a school are explored later in this paper.

**Contention 6: School leaders need to take more responsibility for establishing a professional learning culture within the school.**

A school without a strong professional learning culture is one where staff are highly independent and risk averse, where complacency and professional incompetence is tolerated and where a commitment to improving student learning has been given way to an acceptance of mediocrity or worse. In such a climate, teachers have little sense of common purpose and a limited concern for their own and their colleague's professional development. The leadership team in a school with a poor professional learning culture has not done sufficient to make teachers accountable for their behaviours or to establish processes for promoting such a culture. They have failed their leadership responsibilities and their responsibility to ensure that the school's students are given the best possible opportunities to learn and be successful.

A professional learning culture is most likely to develop when there is high degree of leadership support for teacher learning and risk taking and when there is a high degree of staff interaction, trust and support<sup>8</sup>. Just as a school must have high expectations for student learning, the leadership team needs to establish and act upon high expectations for teacher professional learning. Staff should be introduced to new teaching concepts, new work methods, be encouraged to exercise responsibility and generally operate in an environment where ongoing improvement is expected and constantly being pursued.

The objective of establishing a professional learning culture is to improve the effectiveness and consistency in teaching across the school. Box 3 outlines some strategies for meeting this objective. The strategies have been grouped in the different columns to illustrate the different impact that the suggested strategies might have on a school. All of the strategies outlined are undertaken within the school or local network.

---

<sup>7</sup> It does need to be acknowledged here that a teacher in a very small school is more likely to benefit from external input as such environments are likely to provide limited opportunity for school- managed learning.

<sup>8</sup> Sackney, L. (2003) *Building learning communities for the new economy*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Congress on School Effectiveness and Improvement, Sydney, 5-8 January.

The first column starts with the need for a shared vision for the school and provides some strategies for establishing a school-wide commitment to professional learning (e.g. reference needs to be made to teachers' responsibilities for ongoing learning and for contributing to the learning of their colleagues in the school's teacher code of practice and job descriptions). It also outlines some strategies for gauging where the school is in terms of teaching and learning processes (which can be determined through a pedagogy audit<sup>9</sup> and walkthroughs<sup>10</sup>) and effectiveness (which can be gauged by student and teacher surveys).

The middle column outlines some of the more common means for developing teacher dialogue about teaching and learning and cooperation in the planning and delivery of curriculum lessons. These strategies are equally valuable as part of a teacher induction program as they are for ongoing staff interaction and development. Most importantly, they are a means for establishing teacher trust, collegiality and interdependence which are critical pre-conditions for some of the more confronting strategies (e.g. giving feedback on a colleague's teaching effectiveness) listed in the final column.

*Box 3: Strategies to building the quality and consistency in teaching across the school*

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shared vision</li> <li>• Position roles, responsibilities and accountabilities</li> <li>• Codes of practice</li> <li>• Student and teacher surveys</li> <li>• Pedagogy audits</li> <li>• Walk throughs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Team planning</li> <li>• Learning teams</li> <li>• Teaching teams</li> <li>• Team teaching</li> <li>• Professional reading groups</li> <li>• Involvement in teacher networks</li> <li>• Action research projects</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mentoring</li> <li>• Work shadowing</li> <li>• Coaching</li> <li>• Teacher feedback</li> <li>• Peer tutoring / support</li> <li>• Teacher-run training sessions</li> <li>• Classroom demonstration</li> </ul>
--	--	--

As well as implementing the range of strategies outlined in Box 3, leadership teams could help to develop a learning culture within the school by supporting teachers to take on different job responsibilities, providing opportunities for staff to develop and exercise management and instructional leadership skills, encouraging staff to undertake pedagogy research (e.g. through reading about and observing exemplary practice), providing

<sup>9</sup> A pedagogy audit can take the form of teachers responding to a list of teaching and learning strategies and indicating how often they use particular strategies and when they are most effective, or it can be done building up a list of practices by asking teachers to complete the sentence "The teaching and learning strategies I use effectively in my classroom include ...". The various lists can then be consolidated and converted into an audit list. Audit results can be used to analyse how wide-spread particular practices are being applied, who professes to being competent in a particular practice and where training in a particular practice might be warranted.

<sup>10</sup> A walkthrough is conducted by a small group of people who have or are provided with an issue to investigate (e.g. Are teachers using effective questioning techniques in classes?). They develop or are provided with an observation or interview schedule and disperse throughout the school to observe or discuss with students or teachers how the issue is being addressed and after a set time (e.g. two to three hours) regroup to share their findings and write up what they observed. A walkthrough might also, for example, involve a parent group looking at how discipline in the classroom is being managed or visitors from another school looking at how a particular innovation is being implemented. It is a quick and efficient method for gaining an impression about practices within the school.

opportunities for reflection on teaching processes as well as learning outcomes, having ‘middle managers’ (e.g. subject or level coordinators) accept greater responsibility for developing the teaching effectiveness of their faculty or level team, assisting staff to review the effectiveness of their teaching<sup>11</sup> and ensuring that appropriate professional learning resources<sup>12</sup> (e.g. books, CDs and videos) are purchased for staff use. Box 4 outlines some questions that leadership teams might address when embarking on the task of establishing a school with a vibrant professional learning culture.

*Box 4: Some questions for leaders seeking to develop a professional learning culture*

<b>Structure development opportunities</b>	<b>Review and monitor development</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can job responsibilities be enriched?</li> <li>• How can staff be assisted to develop classroom demonstration skills?</li> <li>• How can staff be encouraged to visit each other’s classrooms and offer feedback?</li> <li>• How can the school’s professional learning library and its usage be improved?</li> <li>• How can we assist staff to take risks?</li> <li>• How might we use our training budget to foster in-school learning opportunities?</li> <li>• How might we formalise coaching and mentoring arrangements?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can we help staff reflect on teaching processes as well as outcomes?</li> <li>• How can we improve the data that are collected to give teachers feedback about their classroom effectiveness?</li> <li>• How can we assist staff to review their developmental progress?</li> <li>• How can we reinvigorate jaded staff?</li> <li>• How can we make staff reviews and development planning more effective?</li> <li>• How can we build a stronger link between teacher learning and teacher behaviour?</li> </ul>

Ideally the professional learning culture of the school would be such that teachers would be committed to continually:

- acquiring new knowledge and skills (learning what and how to improve their teaching)
- implementing new practice (applying new knowledge and skills in the classroom)
- refining new practice through self reflection and feedback (improving implementation)
- sharing new practice through demonstrations, workshops and presentations (teaching others what and how to improve their teaching)
- assisting others to implement improvements through team planning and teaching, coaching and mentoring (spreading the implementation of new knowledge and skills in the classroom)
- refining other’s practice through observation and feedback (improving the implementation of others)

---

<sup>11</sup> Providing timetable arrangements that create blocks of time for teachers to work together, redistributing time to shorten the school day on a weekly basis, reallocating meeting time to training time and in secondary schools, allocating staff to sub-school teams, are structural ways of increasing teacher professional learning opportunities.

<sup>12</sup> A well-stocked professional reading and viewing library and lists of on-line learning resources is essential if we want teachers to take a more active role in their own development and the development of their colleagues. Materials would need to cover the theory, research and practice elements of effective teaching.

### **Contention 7: Generally it is teams, not individuals, who change schools.**

Whilst the above discussion has been about establishing a professional learning culture within a school, because typically professional development tends to be understood as a program that is provided out of the school by an expert, this section offers comments on how to gain benefit from teachers attending an external training session.

There are extensive opportunities for teachers to engage with professional learning activities beyond the school. Development programs (e.g. workshops, seminars and conferences) are provided regionally, state-wide, nationally and internationally. Whilst these professional development events attract a wide range of teachers from different schools, at the individual school level the tendency is usually for the school to release only one or two teachers to attend such an event. This is because this model of professional development is relatively expensive for schools, particularly small schools with limited resources that have to replace teachers on training programs. Consequently, the impact of the school's professional development expenditure is generally negligible as only one or two teachers from the school have been engaged in the event and their capacity to influence other teachers to change their practice as a consequence of ideas they have gained at the training session are extremely limited.

Indeed, such is the limited expectation from an individual teacher's engagement with a professional development program that their obligation to the rest of the school in light of their experience is usually discharged by offering a verbal report to a staff meeting. The message being conveyed is that no-one really expects the individual to exert any real influence over the practices of the school. That is, professional development is a personal experience to be assimilated and responded to personally. There is little expectation that the professional development that was approved for an individual teacher to attend will have any impact across the school. And it is only in the rarest of incidences that such a model of professional development has any impact on the broader school community.

It is equally unlikely that the experience has any ongoing influence on the individuals who participated unless when they returned to their schools they could apply what they had learned without disturbing the dominant, pre-existing practices and processes of other staff. This model of professional development is clearly not a recipe for school change and improvement. Yet it is the model that dominates teachers' professional learning practice.

The observation about the limited impact of an individual on school change still applies when the professional development chosen could clearly contribute in a substantial way to meeting one or more pre-existing priorities and improvement targets of the school. However, in such a circumstance the odds of the experience having some impact on the school are slightly improved. The odds lengthen somewhat though when it comes to teachers undertaking professional development for personal reasons based on personal interests unrelated to school goals and priorities. Such professional development might be personally engaging but it is unlikely to be of any benefit to the school as it invariably fails to meet any of the preconditions required to promote change within the school.

Indeed, if personal professional development is a private undertaking unrelated to the needs of the school or its community, it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that it should be funded from personal resources rather than from those of the school.

Change management theory and the evidence accumulated by frustrated school reformers over the years indicates that it requires teams, teamwork and sustained commitment to really make a difference to a school's processes and practices. A school that viewed a professional development program as a genuine opportunity to promote desired school change thus would send a team of teachers to the program and have established processes back at the school to ensure that the learnings were taken seriously and informed the plans and action for ongoing reform.

The take away message here is that professional development programs contribute best to school effectiveness when:

- group activities are supported in preference to individual activities
- professional development resources are targeted at supporting college improvement priorities, rather than an individual's priorities
- the program/activity being supported has a focus on training rather than education
- processes have been established within the school to incorporate the learning derived from the training program into school-wide discussions and reform strategies and plans.

Consequently, a school's overall professional development plan might be more effective in bringing about change if it was based upon a few key events involving many participants, if these key events had relevance for the various stages of planned change and if in the interim between events participants were required to adopt and reflect upon particular practices that were explored in the events. It might also be more effective if the staff was proactive in determining the professional learning experiences that are most essential for the school and if potential presenters were required to develop their programs in line with the school's requirements.

A final observation for this section is that 'professional development' is not a panacea for poor teacher performance. Poor performance can be a consequence of factors that are internal to the individual (e.g. poor motivation, a values conflict, laziness and inappropriate personality) or to contextual factors that are external to the individual (e.g. lack of goal clarity, poor work environment, ill-defined standards and expectations and a lack of peer or leadership support). If poor performance is a symptom of these causal factors, then a training program will not correct the situation. This is why a plan for improved teacher and school effectiveness needs to be multifaceted and recognise that improvement can be generated through a broad range of improvement strategies.

## **PART 2: What is the solution?**

In Part 1 it was argued that most professional development is ineffective for improving teacher practice and bringing about change in schools. This contention was based on the observation that:

- in most cases professional development is equated with an externally provided training program
- most ‘training’ programs provided for teachers are in fact ‘educational’ programs as they are not designed to produce observable teacher change
- generally only one or two teachers per school are able to attend a ‘training’ program and they thus have a limited capacity to bring about desired reforms across the school

Whilst a broad range of issues were discussed in the previous section, this section will outline some strategies for addressing the perceived short-comings in the way that teacher ‘professional development’ is generally administered in schools. More particularly, it will provide a series of practical strategies for closing the gap between individual teacher development activities and improved classroom teaching. This focus has been adopted as it seems to be the most effective for bringing about a change that will have a significant impact on school practice and teacher effectiveness.

### **Contention 8: Individual professional learning plans should start with identifying the teacher’s change intentions**

The typical process adopted when determining the contents of a teacher’s individual development plan is to ask the teacher to nominate a development need. Unlike some professions where a needs analysis is undertaken through an observation of one’s work, 360 degree feedback or through a self-assessment task, teachers typically identify their own development needs based on their own perceptions of need. Whilst this may be done in the context of a ‘formal’ appraisal or performance review session, the actual identification of need is more a consequence of a personal decision than a decision by an informed other, and is informed by subjective rather than objective factors.

However, the subjectivity of the process for identifying one’s development need is not the main concern here. The real issue is that this process, however it is managed, tends to generate a generic rather than a specific development need and places the focus on identifying what learning is needed or desirable rather than on what improvement in teaching behaviour should be pursued. Consequently, it is the participation in the learning that is seen to be the key purpose, a purpose that is achieved when an appropriate learning program is attended, whereas participation in a development activity is merely a means to an end. The end being improved performance by the teacher.

In order to establish an appropriate focus for professional learning individual teacher professional learning plans should be derived from asking the questions:

- What specific behaviour change or improvement actions do you want or need to initiate in your classroom (or the school)?

- What specific assistance do you require to implement the desired change?

The first question is the key question. It places the focus on what change is being sought. The answer to this question leads to the identification of a specific rather than a generic behaviour change. The answer to this question should also become the target for the professional learning plan. That is, when subsequently reviewing a teacher's performance the question to be asked about professional learning is not whether the teacher participated in professional development but whether she met her target to improve one or more specific aspects of her teaching.

Box 5 provides an illustration of a specific improvement focus that could be converted into a behaviour change target.

*Box 5: Examples of a specific teacher improvement focus*

- I want to improve students' ability to discuss the novels they are reading.
- I want to be able to manage class disruptions better.
- I want to encourage more student self and peer assessment.
- I want to improve my questioning skills.
- I want to involve students in making decisions about their own learning

The improvement target would describe what the new practice or changed behaviour is and when it will be adopted. A description of what would be observable in the classroom/teacher's behaviour that indicated the new practice had been adopted would also be included in the plan. These descriptions both assist teachers to clarify what their intent is and provide a means for reflecting on the degree to which the improvement strategy was implemented. If need be, incremental improvement could be encouraged so that the commitment to change can be staged and the commencement of implementation is not extend beyond a term. Specific change targets should be able to be implemented within a reasonable time-span so that new specific targets can be established and implemented as the year progresses. If continuous teacher improvement is the goal, then generic statements of development intent and an annual review of whether development plans were met will not assist in meeting this goal.

Having established an appropriate improvement focus and converting this into a classroom teaching improvement target, the second question helps to steer the discussion away from the identification of a generic training program. At this stage two further strategies are suggested for ensuring that teachers responding to this question do not lapse back into thinking their need will be met by a generic, externally provided training program. The first is a process for clarifying the nature of the learning need and the second is process for matching of the identified need with an appropriate learning strategy.

## **Contention 9: Greater clarification of the support teachers actually need to implement changes is required**

It is essential that development plan actions are built upon a clear understanding of the teacher's specific development /learning needs. One way to assist this clarification is to ask whether the support required to implement the improvement target is primarily a need for knowledge, skill development or attitudinal change.

### *Box 6: Clarifying the nature and specifics of the development support*

*Questions to help clarify the specific learning need are:*

- Do you lack knowledge of what to do about managing your class or time better?
- Do you know what to do, but don't know how to do it? (i.e. you lack the skills)
- Do you know what and how to make improvements but lack the drive/conviction to change? (i.e. you are risk averse or lack confidence)

Whilst these needs are hierarchical (i.e. without basic knowledge the teacher cannot apply and improve necessary skills), an individual development plan could incorporate all of the elements and sequence development actions to accommodate each of the different stages of learning<sup>13</sup>.

The clarification of the nature of the learning need or support required by the teacher enables a better matching of need with development action. If the need is for knowledge, then options that deliver knowledge input would be incorporated into the plan. If skills needed developing, then consideration would need to be given to options that developed skills. Finally, if the problem is overcoming an inappropriate attitude<sup>14</sup>, then options that made it difficult to avoid applying knowledge and skills would need to be identified.

Whilst the need for improved knowledge and skills can be addressed by self-study and a broad range of other development strategies, poor attitude, reticence, laziness and conservatism are unlikely to be changed by a training strategy. In such cases, a strategy that focuses on personal accountability is required. For example, attitude change can be encouraged and monitored by an observer, mentor or critical friend. If the teacher lacks confidence and needs 'moral support' to initiate change, the presence of a peer providing encouragement and feedback or providing back-up in a class may be needed. Whatever the identified need, the learning plan should ensure that the learning need is matched by a learning strategy appropriate for the need.

---

<sup>13</sup> The discussion here is about improving 'generic' teaching skills and whilst this cannot be done without a teacher teaching something (i.e content), if one's purpose was to improve the teaching of content knowledge, then the professional learning would need to encompass content knowledge and engage the participant in observing and using content teaching skills.

<sup>14</sup> Time management is the classic example of a process that lapses not because most of us lack the knowledge and skills but because we shirk the level of commitment required to sustain effective practices. We generally know what to do and how to do it, but lack the will to sustain it. If we are unable to manage our time, the answer lies in strategies to improve our motivation not our knowledge or skills.

Two further strategies are suggested for reshaping the development process. The first is concerned with broadening teachers' appreciation of learning options, particularly options that exist within the school, and the second is a means for assisting teachers to make pragmatic decisions about which development options to pursue. Both strategies aim to increase the likelihood that whatever improvement commitments teachers incorporate into their development plan will be met.

**Contention 10: Development plans need to be practical, action-focused and time-bound.**

Development plans do not need to be elaborate documents. Indeed, the more focused and pragmatic the plan, the more that it can be managed by the individual, the more likely that it will be implemented. Whilst some learning may need to be pursued off-site, teachers can take greater responsibility for their own professional learning if the means for learning is school located and can be actioned a relatively short notice. Box 7 summarises some of the factors to consider when selecting a development strategy.

*Box 7: Advice on selecting professional learning strategies*

- Select from the range of possible development options those that:
- are most appropriate for the specific development need identified
  - are most compatible with the learner's preferred learning style
  - can be readily implemented within the school environment
  - can be implemented immediately or in the short-term in preference to the longer-term

The earlier section of this paper listed a range of development options that teachers could use and made the case for building greater opportunities for teachers to undertake development whilst within the school. Box 8 provides a description of a small range of school-located learning strategies. Whilst these strategies could be available within every school, and schools could add many further options, the preparation of a list such as this helps to shift teachers away from automatically thinking that their development need will best be met by attending a conference. If all schools prepared a description of the actual opportunities for development available to teachers within the school and if this list was coupled with a tool to assist the teacher to reflect on their preferred learning style, then the likely outcome would be development plans that were well grounded in what learning was possible and desirable for the individual.

*Box 8: Examples of some school-based strategies for acquiring knowledge and skills*

- Self-directed Reading, Listening to or Viewing training materials**  
This can be done as an individual or group activity (like a book club where discussion follows the reading) and is able to be actioned at any time. A good profession learning library (books, journals, manuals, CD ROMs and videos) in a school is a vital resource for self and group study.
- Participation in an In-house workshop**  
In-house workshops can be initiated by an individual, teaching team or faculty. They are a means for sharing of ideas, reflection, team building, networking and building across department cooperation.

**Mentor advice**

The establishment of a formally organised mentoring program (including a mentor training program) provides a framework for less experienced staff to gain access to more experienced staff. A mentor can provide advice and counsel to less experienced staff who may be troubled by an issue or wish to take on a new challenge. Mentors are a 'dedicated network of one' who are committed to assisting colleagues to improve their performance.

**Classroom observation**

Observing good classroom practitioners and debriefing after the observation session is an excellent way to see theory translated into action. Appropriate protocols will need to be established about what to do prior, during and after the session to ensure that it is a positive and productive experience for you and the teacher you are observing.

**Team teaching**

This strategy enables you to learn from and share your expertise with a colleague. The 'teaming' could cover joint planning of the lesson as well as joint delivery and evaluation of the lesson. To make this a conscious learning activity for yourself, set a learning target for yourself, preferably one that requires you to try something new or something you are still not entirely comfortable doing. This strategy also offers the opportunity for you to receive and give performance feedback.

Learning plans need to include those development strategies that are most suited to meeting the learning need and to the teacher's particular teaching circumstances and school environment. Box 9 outlines a simple tool for assisting teachers to reflect on their preferred learning style and on the generic learning options available to them. Its purpose is to help teachers frame a learning plan that is realistic rather than a wish-list of learning strategies that are unlikely to be actioned.

*Box 9: A tool for assisting development planning to be based on events that are likely to be actioned*

When considering your development strategies/options, only adopt those that you are likely to engage and persist with.

For example, are you likely to learn best from:

- self study (I prefer to research things in my own time and in my own way.)
- expert input (I prefer to hear/see what an expert or accomplished practitioner has to offer.)
- peer support (I prefer to learn with and/or from my colleagues.)
- experiment/experience (I prefer to learn by trying new ways of doing things.)
- peer pressure (I tend to learn best when peers put pressure on me to do so.)

When considering your development strategies/options, only consider those that are likely to be available to you in your work environment.

For example, is your work environment likely to provide you with:

- help from your peers (I work with supportive colleagues who are able and willing to assist.)
- help from your leaders (The school's leadership team are able and willing to assist.)
- help from external sources (I am able to attend external programs that could meet my needs.)

- |  |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><input type="checkbox"/> self study resources (I can access relevant reading materials, websites, videos, etc.)</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> opportunities to learn by doing (I am encouraged and assisted to try new approaches.)</li></ul> |
|--|

A further strategy for making development plans pragmatic and actionable, is to plan to do something in the short term, whilst seeking longer term options. Development activities are often deferred because the learner is waiting for the right opportunity (and never finds it) or because the development task appears so time consuming that it is never started. However, as ‘development’ can simply involve a teacher in changing some aspect of their teaching to make lessons more effective than they were before, all development plans should contain strategies that can be initiated immediately or within the short-term (within a month). These strategies could be supplemented with middle (within a term) and longer-term (a semester) strategies. An example of a short-term strategy is to read a relevant text and try what is suggested. A mid-term strategy might be to seek a colleague’s feedback on the effectiveness of the changed approach and a longer-term strategy might be to seek a formal review of performance or to offer to demonstrate the approach to others in the school.

A development plan checklist is outlined in Box 10. Its purpose is to summarise the various elements that should be addressed in a development plan.

*Box 10: Development Plan Checklist*

Is the plan:
--------------

- |  |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Specific (What will change? What new approach will be adopted?)</li><li>• Strategic (What is the problem being addressed? Is the change important?)</li><li>• Realistic (Can it be done? Will it be done?)</li><li>• Action-based (What will be done – in the short and mid-term?)</li><li>• Time-limited (When will it be done? When should it be reviewed?)</li><li>• Measurable (How will we know that it has been implemented? Can we measure the impact of the change? How will we know if it has improved learning opportunities or outcomes?)</li></ul> |
|--|

To conclude this section, Box 11 provides a summary of the stages to be followed when developing a professional learning plan for an individual teacher. The main message being that the starting point for the plan should be a commitment to initiate an improvement in an aspect of teaching.

*Box 11: Stages of the individual development planning process*

- |  |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Identify and describe the desired changed teaching approach or behaviour.</li><li>• Convert this into a development target.</li><li>• Identify the barriers to adopting the changed behaviour (knowledge, skills or attitude).</li><li>• Identify learning options that will enable the learner to overcome barriers to change.</li><li>• Select the most appropriate and practical options (specific, in-house and short-term are best).</li><li>• Identify ways to measure or observe the effectiveness of the change.</li><li>• Alert colleagues to the contents of the plan and wherever possible enlist the assistance of others in the implementation of the plan.</li></ul> |
|--|

## Conclusion

Fullan<sup>15</sup> indicates that teacher and school improvement requires teachers to be innovative and improve their teaching practices and suggests that ‘we need far more intensive professional learning within a culture of continuous deliberation’. He also suggests that this learning ‘needs to be continually tested by external ideas or standards about what is best practice’. This paper concurs with this perspective and has developed suggestions for building a strong professional learning culture within a school and for ensuring that teacher exposure to external ideas and standards is translated into changed practice within the school. However, its basic premise is that much of what is labeled professional development whilst exposing teachers to new ideas and policies does little to improve the quality of teaching in schools.

The various strategies offered as a means for improving professional learning and the quality of teaching in schools have two key objectives. The first is to provide alternatives to the external training course as the way to improve the quality of teaching and to position the school as a rich environment for professional learning. The second is to improve the utility of professional learning plans and thereby increase the likelihood that they will be an effective tool for improving teaching.

Finally, whilst the case for the need to reform professional learning understandings and processes has probably been overstated, the concern remains with the underutilisation of professional learning opportunities within the school and with the limited impact of professional development on the quality of teaching. The ideas and strategies outlined in this paper are a contribution towards remedying these concerns.

---

<sup>15</sup> For example, refer to the Michael Fullan interview in the *Journal of Staff Development*, Vol.24, No. 1, 2003 available online at [www.nsd.org/library/publications/jsd/fullan241.cfm](http://www.nsd.org/library/publications/jsd/fullan241.cfm)

## **Appendices: Two models of in-class learning**

Part 1 above discussed a range of opportunities for promoting school-based professional learning. Two practices that were highlighted as offering the greatest opportunities for improving classroom practice were teacher observation and feedback and Lesson Study. A brief description of the practices that are associated with these activities is provided below.

### ***Model 1: Teacher Demonstration/Observation and Feedback***

Whilst teachers are quite used to visiting each other's classrooms and to team planning and teaching, it is unusual for this practice to extend to teachers giving each other feedback about their teaching performance or to formally demonstrating to a colleague how to apply a particular teaching and learning strategy. (Some of the more obvious reasons for this are discussed above.)

This section provides some brief guidelines designed to make those involved in an observation and feedback session more secure about and at ease with this activity. In essence, the guidelines attempt to give the person being observed some control over the process and the observer some guidance about how to make the activity an effective learning experience.

The guidelines cover a series of actions that could be taken prior, during and after the teaching demonstration. Teachers would need to adapt these guidelines to make them consistent with the activity being undertaken as the emphasis would shift depending upon the role of the teacher being observed. In some instances the observation is a means for the observer to learn and the teacher to demonstrate a particular applied skill, in others it is a means for the observer to observe the teacher at work and provide feedback to them on aspects of their performance. The latter purpose is generally more difficult to manage as it involves the giving and receiving of constructive criticism and increases the vulnerability of the demonstrator. Consequently, before attempting to introduce observation and feedback processes as a common practice within a school, schools are advised to spend some time reaching agreement about the protocols to be followed and to revising these as teachers become more familiar with the process.

In order to ensure that all parties at the outset are clear about their roles and expectations and establish the parameters within which they are willing to work it is suggested that participants meet prior to the lesson to go through the steps contained in Box 12.

#### *Box 12: Before the lesson*

- The demonstrator should establish the context – What has happened to date?
- The observer should ascertain teacher's aims and expectations – What do you hope to achieve?
- Participants should share the lesson plan – What is being attempted and how will this be done?
- The demonstrator should identify potential difficulties and constraints – What might come unstuck?
- Participants should agree the observation style – Is the observer passive or a co-teacher?

- Participants should agree on the focus for the observation and/or feedback – Is it general and/or specific?
- Participants should agree on the debriefing arrangements – Where, when and of what duration?

Prior to the lesson, the observer will also need to develop some observation tools or strategies (e.g. a checklist, an anticipation chart, etc.) suited to the task at hand. If the observer is to provide feedback on a specific aspect of the lesson (e.g. the use of questioning techniques or the number of interruptions and how they are managed) then their task can be aided by pre-specifying categories of teacher and/or student behavior that is likely to be evident and using these as a starting framework for collecting observations. Generally, the more focused the observation, the more likely the feedback will be robust and the more likely the demonstrator will have useful data and feedback upon which to reflect.

Similarly, the demonstrator would need to ensure that their lesson planning builds in features that the observer wishes to learn about or that they would value feedback on.

Box 13 provides some advice to the observer. Corresponding advice for the demonstrator would include observations that the presence of an observer may impact on class behaviour, that they should persist with the lesson and ignore the observer even if the lesson goes in unexpected directions and that little will be learnt if they ‘play it safe’ and do not attempt more challenging activities.

*Box 13: During the lesson (Observer)*

- Recognise that your presence will have an affect on the class.
- Confine your observations to those elements agreed upon.
- Observations of pupil behaviour are as important as teacher observation.
- Observe behaviour, don't interrupt.
- Stick to the agreed observation style.
- Take notes or register incidences of activities – using an appropriate & agreed format.

To build teacher confidence in the process and the skills of those observing and giving feedback, mock lessons can be used to familiarise participants with their roles and to build the skill of providing constructive feedback. As teachers and observers become more familiar and comfortable with the process and more trusting of their colleagues, the more risk taking will be evident in classrooms and the more open will be the discussion of weaknesses and improvement strategies. Reversing the roles of observer and demonstrator is also a good way to build trust.

Box 14 outlines some steps to take following observation that are designed to make the feedback session as productive as possible. If the demonstration was to illustrate how good practice is applied in the classroom, then the demonstrator would meet with the observer to field questions and get a commitment from the observer to implement the methods observed. This could be done with the demonstrator acting as a co-teacher or

with the demonstrator observing and providing feedback, depending on how confident the teacher implementing the new methods felt.

*Box 14: After the lesson (Feedback)*

- Confirm the time and place for briefing.
- Give the teacher an opportunity for self-evaluation – This is a good starting point for feedback discussion.
- Review the lesson aims and expectations.
- Identify and analyse the lesson strengths.
- Identify and analyse the lesson weaknesses – If the observation has a specific focus then stick to those aspects of the lesson for which feedback was request.
- Provide the teacher with the opportunity to reflect upon what is being fed back and what it means for their practice – Would they do something different if they could have the lesson over again?
- Identify improvement strategies – The quality of the observations, conclusions and improvement advice will determine the extent to which the teacher sees the undertaking as a benefit and worth repeating.
- Contract for further support or to swap roles.

As participation in the process extends across the school, those less experienced with or concerned about the process could be reassured if one of the school's more skilled feedback practitioners was on hand to monitor the feedback session and debrief the participants after their experience. Ideally, teachers should see it as their professional responsibility to receive and give feedback to their colleagues and this practice should become a commonplace and taken-for-granted activity experienced by all teachers over and over again throughout their career.

***Model 2: The lesson study approach***

Teachers in Japan improve their teaching through the lesson study process in which teachers jointly plan, observe, analyze, and refine actual classroom lessons called research lessons. This method is widely credited for the steady improvement of Japanese elementary mathematics and science instruction. In essence, the lesson study is a means for improving the structure of a lesson. This approach has been documented by Stigler and Hiebert<sup>16</sup> and has also been described in some detail by Zbar<sup>17</sup> in an earlier IARTV publication and readers who are interested in pursuing this idea further are advised to refer to these works. Zbar observes that the process:

- is based on a model of long-term, continuous improvement
- maintains a consistent focus on student learning
- focuses on direct improvement of teaching context
- is collaborative.

---

<sup>16</sup> Stigler, J. and Hiebert, J. (1999) *The Teaching Gap: The best ideas from the world's teachers for improving education in the classroom*, The Free Press, New York.

<sup>17</sup> Zbar, V. (2002) *Teaching is the Key: Completing the jigsaw*, IARTV Seminar series No. 111.

The lesson study approach involves teachers working together in a small team over a substantial period to design, implement, test and improve one or more research lessons. When applied in Victorian schools, some have reported that as our lessons are more differentiated than those in Asian countries (in this case Japan is the originator of the lesson study method) the lesson study approach is a lot of work that produces a lesson that may not be used again. Others have indicated that it is a good process for two or three teachers who are working at the same level as it enables them to really think deeply about the best way to construct a lesson so that key learning points are covered, appropriate task transitions are made between individual, pair and group work and an appropriate balance between teacher input and student reflection, discussion and response is maintained.

Whereas the objective of teacher observation and feedback is to improve the skills of the individual teacher, the objective of the lesson study is to refine lessons so that they fully engage and challenge all students. It is a rigorous teacher learning activity that contributes to teacher knowledge about effective planning and teaching. A school that regularly used the teacher feedback and lesson study approaches would be providing a very rich environment for teacher learning that had a direct impact on the day to day practices of its staff.

Box15 provides a brief description of the various stages of the method<sup>18</sup>.

*Box 15: Lesson Study Method*

- Define the problem – What are you trying to improve?
- Plan the lesson – This is a small group activity.
- Teach the lesson whilst the planning group observes.
- Evaluate and reflect on the lesson (not the teacher).
- Revise the lesson to make it more effective.
- Teach the revised lesson – This time a wider group observes.
- Evaluate and reflect again to fine-tune the lesson.
- Share the results – Write a report so that learning spreads.

---

<sup>18</sup> More information about this approach can be located at <http://www.tc.columbia.edu/lessonstudy/lessonstudy.html>