

Supporting High Quality Teacher Professional Learning Practices

A practical guide



What is the practical guide?

This practical guide (A3 pull out page) describes a four phase, cyclical model that outlines an ongoing professional learning process for teachers. The model includes suggestions on the conditions that support the implementation of high quality professional learning within a learning context.

The intent of the guide is to support conversations with teachers on high quality professional learning, through the four phases.

Who is the practical guide for?

- School leaders determining the professional learning goals and needs of their school or learning context
- Professional learning coordinators considering the professional learning needs of their teaching teams
- Teachers designing their individual professional learning plan

What is the purpose of the practical guide?

The practical guide aims to support the development of schools as learning communities. The intended outcome is to maximise the impact of teacher professional learning on student outcomes. The benefits of high quality professional learning are vast; teachers benefit in terms of professional growth which in turn contributes to an enhanced learning culture.

The practical guide should assist with streamlining the professional learning process within schools to enable these benefits. The practical guide consists of four stages of high quality professional learning: (i) identify professional learning needs, (ii) select and undertake professional learning, (iii) apply the learning, and (iv) evaluate impact. The representation of this process in a cycle demonstrates the non-static, continuous nature of high quality professional learning. It provides prompts at each stage to guide decision making and reflection on professional learning activities. For example the practical guide might support readers to consider a wide variety of professional learning approaches.

How do I use the practical guide?

The practical guide can be helpful at any stage of the professional learning process. For instance, professional learning that has already been undertaken can still be applied and evaluated. However, it is ideal to begin at the 'identify professional learning' stage and follow the cycle through to 'evaluate impact'. The amount of time it takes to proceed through the stages will vary between teachers, school contexts and professional learning approaches.

Identify professional learning needs

Effective professional learning starts with understanding teachers' learning needs, "at the individual, team or school...level in response to an assessment of students' learning needs" (Tooley & Connally 2016, p.5). Professional learning undertaken by teachers needs to be relevant and focussed on the problems of practice in their context. This will ensure individuals and schools focus their efforts on driving the needs of teacher professional learning to improve student outcomes.

Using the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers, the Australian Curriculum and school-based planning documents support a shared vision of the knowledge and skills that teachers need to have to have maximum impact on student learning. This vision is valuable when identifying professional learning needs.

In identifying professional learning needs, consider the following questions:

- What data sources are available to you to identify specific knowledge and practice that could be developed further?
- How can you leverage instructional leaders to identify the professional learning needs of teachers?
- Are you involving teachers in the decision making about their professional learning needs?
- Are you considering current school initiatives and school improvement goals?
- Is there a shared understanding amongst staff of the school's vision of what excellent teaching looks like?

Examples of data to support the identification of professional learning needs include self-assessment tools (such as the Teacher Self-Assessment Tool), classroom observation reports, lesson plans, professional development plans, professional conversations, student work samples, student data and formative assessments.

Professional learning and Outcomes for Students

Helen Timperley - Professor Emeritus of Education - The University of Auckland

It is generally accepted that the effectiveness of professional learning should be judged on the difference it makes to outcomes for students. But our outcome measures have not kept pace with what is known about learning, particularly the importance of developing motivation, meta-cognition and self-regulation. For reasons of space, I have brought these ideas together under the umbrella of developing student agency.

An obvious issue is the need for better measures of these outcomes so we focus collectively on what we value rather than value what we can measure easily. An alternative is to work in ways that integrate these attributes and their measurement into the processes of professional learning rather than treating them solely as outcomes. Many approaches to professional learning begin by finding out what is happening for learners, and the extent to which they feel they have agency in their learning through questionnaires and interviews. This is an essential step but still positions the adults as being in control and is best described as using 'student voice' in professional learning.

A much more powerful process involves students in the collection of the evidence, and even more importantly, in the interpretation of what it all means. In doing so, they become involved in identifying the issues and co-constructing ways to address them with their teachers. In addition, the development of student and teacher agency engages them in ongoing checking to identify if their collective efforts are making enough of a difference and to make adjustments in response. In this way, measurement of these outcomes becomes integrated into the process of promoting both professional and student learning.

References

Timperley, H., Kaser, L., & Halbert, J. (2014). A framework for transforming learning in schools: Innovation and the spiral of inquiry. Seminar Series 234. Melbourne: Centre for Strategic Education.

Select and undertake effective professional learning

The most effective professional learning approaches are “primarily school-based and school managed and focused on improving teaching practice” (Cole 2012, p. 7).

Research indicates an effective professional learning approach “is intensive and ongoing, and connected to practice; focuses on the teaching and learning of specific academic content; is connected to other school initiatives and builds strong working relationships among teachers” (Darling-Hammond et al. 2009, p.5).

Research also suggests that effective professional learning approaches expose teachers to evidence-based strategies and discipline specific content, strategies that enable students to learn that content, the challenges students may face in learning that content. (Cole 2012, p. 16; Gulamhussein 2013, p. 17).

Focusing on student needs and education needs builds coherence between the daily work of teacher and development of their professional practice.

In selecting the professional learning approach consider the following questions:

- Which professional learning approach will best meet the identified professional learning need?
- Is there alignment between the identified professional learning need, school initiatives and school improvement plan?
- How can you leverage current expertise within the school to support the selected professional learning approach?
- What current school structures and processes can be utilised in the selected professional learning approach?
- What challenges may occur in undertaking the selected professional learning approach? How can these challenges be managed?

Many quality professional learning approaches are job embedded such as classroom observation and feedback, team teaching, collaborative planning, professional learning communities, and action research. Other professional learning approaches include attending professional reading, conferences and workshops,

Professional communities and collaboration as a way of life

Dr Lawrence Ingvarson

I often ask teachers where they go for good ideas – who they see as their professional leaders. Sometimes I provide them with a list of sources for improving their teaching and ask them which they regard as the most important – the list might include professional reading, university lecturers, school principals, professional learning courses, and so on.

Their responses are always the same. They say OTHER TEACHERS by far. Which leaves me wondering; how well do we ensure working conditions capitalize on the idea that teachers value most what they learn from other teachers?

For me, building professional community is basically about building on this knowledge; it's about increasing the frequency of opportunities for teachers to learn from each other as a routine part of work, especially through conversations based on concrete evidence about each other's practice and student work samples. But we must reduce workloads if we want this to become a reality.

My definition of a professional community is a simple one; a group of professionals who regularly and systematically use evidence to review how well their practices align with current professional standards and meet the needs of students.

The research is clear; it is mainly by strengthening their schools as professional communities that school leaders improve the quality of teaching and student outcomes. Schools with a strong professional culture are characterized by shared norms and values, a focus on student learning, collaborative approaches to work, reflective inquiry into teaching practices and deprivatisation of practice.

Deprivatisation is the key. A group of teachers become a strong professional community when they commit to working together in ways that deprivatise their practice in a range of ways. They thereby increase opportunities to learn from each other; to review and improve each other's practice. A rigorous and well-rewarded external professional certification system reinforces these practices.

Strong professional communities are accountable communities. They are comfortable providing colleagues with examples of how their practice matches high professional standards; for example in staff seminars. They accept that the evaluation of practice is not just a responsibility of school management. Professional communities take action to rectify practices that are less than optimal for students.

Apply the learning

Applying professional learning is key to achieving a change in teaching practice and student outcomes. What matters is the action taken by the teacher to implement the learning in their classroom if it is to make a difference to teacher quality and student outcomes.

The school environment is key to the transference of knowledge and learning into changed teaching practice. Teachers are well placed to apply their professional learning to classroom practice when there is “support for professional learning through school structures, explicit planning and the allocation of time”. (Charter)

A culture of learning supports the successful implementation of this step. Collaboration where teachers reflect on and refine their practice then share their expertise is a key element of this stage. Continual feedback is equally important.

In supporting the application of professional learning consider the following questions:

- What school systems and processes are in place to support teachers to try new strategies and reflect on their learning?
- What formal or informal opportunities are there, for teachers to provide feedback, to reflect and to challenge thinking?
- Is there agreement amongst relevant teachers about what the practice should look like when applied effectively in the classroom?
- Are teachers supported to experience gradual and incremental professional growth by applying their learning in phases?
- How has the application of learning contributed to school improvement goals?

Examples of how to reflect on and refine the learning being applied include focusing on changing one or two practices at a time to support the transference of learning, coaching, professional learning communities, pairing teachers for observations, feedback from colleagues and school leaders, observation and feedback – between colleagues and school leaders, and reflecting on learning with colleagues.

School leadership and professional learning: infusing the DNA

Dr Louise Stoll, Professor of Professional Learning, UCL Institute of Education

For successful student learning, schools must become learning organizations. Continuous, impactful teacher professional learning inside, outside and across schools' learning communities is a fundamental feature. This may sound obvious, but it's not always the reality. School leadership is critical to make sure that teacher professional learning is pervasive, and that the best conditions nurture and sustain it. What's required?

Ensuring powerful professional learning – Inform your leadership practice with evidence on adult and professional learning that makes a difference for teachers' practice and students' learning. Doing this, you can ensure that professional learning addresses problems identified in students' learning and wellbeing, engage teachers, develop theories of action about the difference professional learning makes, and carry out inquiries to evaluate and refine its processes and assess impact.

Creating the learning culture – Be clear that 'everybody learns here every day', model your own learning, and get involved in as well as promoting, teacher professional learning. Nourish a collaborative culture that values trust, curiosity to investigate practice together and willingness to try something new. Use failure for learning, so that teachers feel safe to step out of their comfort zones and take risks, e.g. open their practice to peers, be challenged, and experiment with and practise new learning. Stimulate and facilitate learning conversations, exchange of knowledge and sharing of practice, and encourage collective responsibility where teachers care about each other's learning.

Designing supportive structures – Integrate teachers' professional learning within a consistent, coherent approach to improvement and future development. Weave it into school plans, align it with appraisal systems, and allocate sufficient time and funding. Also, create roles and opportunities for others to lead and champion professional learning.

Evaluate impact

Evaluating the professional learning experience on three levels – school support, a teacher's learning and application of the acquired knowledge and skills, and student outcomes, can show whether the professional learning has made the intended change. Measuring at multiple levels will assist in identifying which step in the professional learning practical guide helped or hindered the learning. This can then guide future refinements to the way professional learning experiences are selected and undertaken and be used to inform next steps and ongoing professional learning needs.

In evaluating the impact of professional learning consider the following questions:

- How can you maintain a professional learning plan that tracks the type of professional learning approaches being undertaken and the content of the professional learning?
- Have measures been selected to ensure the professional learning is leading to a change in practice?
- Do you know which professional learning approaches had the greatest impact on teachers' and students' learning?
- Which school structures and processes were used to support the professional learning and how will you measure them?

Examples of ways to evaluate professional learning approaches include classroom observation, formative assessment, student data and teacher perception.

Plan Right, and Evaluation Takes Care of Itself
Thomas R. Guskey - University of Kentucky

Most school leaders see evaluating professional learning as a burdensome task that involves collecting data when activities are completed to determine if anything made a difference. These formal, add-on, summative responsibilities require time and energy that busy school leaders can ill-afford. But in truth, if professional learning is planned well, nearly all essential evaluation tasks are addressed before activities begin. When you plan well, evaluation takes care of itself.

How do we plan well? One of the best ways to plan effective professional learning is simply to reverse the order of steps outlined in *Evaluating Professional Development* (Guskey, 2000), starting at the end and working backward. We begin by describing the student learning outcomes we want to influence and what evidence we trust to verify that impact. These outcomes typically relate to academic achievement goals, but also may involve particular student behaviors, attitudes, or dispositions.

Second we must select the strategies, techniques, or practices most likely to produce those results. This entails collaboratively investigating the research supporting those strategies, the quality of that research, and the critical elements involved in implementation.

In the third step we identify the specific aspects of organizational support required to ensure high quality implementation. For example, do our schools offer a safe and supportive environment that encourages innovation? Are we ready to provide teachers with the resources, time, materials, and, most importantly, backing and assistance from school leaders needed to put these strategies into practice?

Fourth we need to specify the knowledge and skills required for implementation. In other words, what do teachers need to know and be able to do to implement these strategies with fidelity in the classes they teach? And the final step is determining the activities and experiences that best help teachers acquire that essential knowledge and skills.

By following this backward planning process, school leaders will address nearly all essential evaluation questions, determine upfront what evaluation evidence they need, and provide a framework for ensuring professional learning activities are optimally effective in improving teachers' practice and student learning outcomes.

Guskey, T. R. (2000). *Evaluating Professional Development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

School culture and supporting conditions

Professional learning will be most effective when it takes place within a culture where teachers and school leaders expect and are expected to be active learners, to reflect on, receive feedback on and improve their pedagogical practice, and by doing so to improve student outcomes. (Charter p.3)

The Charter identifies characteristics of a high quality professional learning culture as:

- a high degree of leadership support for ongoing adult learning and risk taking
- collective responsibility for improving practice
- disciplined collaboration aimed at specific and relevant goals that relate to the learning needs of students
- high levels of trust, interaction and inter-dependence
- support for professional learning through school structures, explicit planning and the allocation of time
- a focus on the professional learning that is most likely to be effective in improving professional practice and student outcomes.

For further information **To be completed**

- Professional learning essential guide to learning culture
- Leadership scenario – learning culture
- Charter
- Framework

The evidence base for this practical guide

To assist in the development of this practical guide, AITSL examined Australian and international research on professional learning for teachers. Major supporting evidence includes:

Tooley, M., & Connally, K. 2016, *No panacea: Diagnosing what ails teacher professional development before reaching for remedies*, Washington, DC: New America.

Cole, P 2012, *Linking effective professional learning with effective teaching practice*, Melbourne: Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership.

Darling-Hammond, L, Wei, RC, Andree, A, Richardson, N, & Orphanos, S 2009, *Professional learning in the learning profession: A status report on teacher development in the United States and abroad*, National Staff Development Council: Dallas, TX, retrieved 7 July 2017, <<https://learningforward.org/docs/pdf/nsdcstudy2009.pdf>>.

Gulamhussein, A 2013, *Teaching the Teachers: Effective Professional Development in an Era of High Stakes Accountability*, Center for Public Education.

Killion, J., & Kennedy, J. (2012). The sweet spot in professional learning. *JSD*, 33(5), 10–17. Retrieved from <http://learningforward.org/docs/jsd-october-2012/killion335.pdf>

Yoon, K. S., Duncan, T., Lee, S. W-Y., Scarloss, B., & Shapley, K. L. (2007). *Reviewing the evidence on how teacher professional development affects student achievement (issues & answers report, REL 2007-No. 033)*. Washington, DC: U.S Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Southwest, Austin, TX. Retrieved 26 May 2015, from http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/southwest/pdf/rel_2007033.pdf

Identify professional learning need

Before selecting professional learning to be undertaken, teachers and school leaders need to consider what the need is, how it relates to school improvement goals and other processes and if the appropriate support is in place.

- *What is the identified learning need?*
- *What outcome do we want to achieve?*

Select and undertake professional learning

The professional learning that is chosen needs to be fit for purpose and display the characteristics in the [Australian Charter for the Professional Learning of Teachers and School Leaders](#). Teachers and school leaders need to consider when identifying PL that it is relevant, collaborative and evidence-based.

- *What professional learning experience (activities or approach) will be most appropriate for my learning goals/the needs of my learners and school/setting?*
- *What specific knowledge and skills is required to challenge my thinking and practice?*

Characteristics to enable a high quality professional learning culture

- Leadership support
- High levels of trust
- Purposeful collaboration
- Adequate time and resourcing
- Strong school vision and direction
- Alignment with P&D process

Evaluate impact

Throughout the process teachers and school leaders need to monitor the impact of the professional learning on teacher practice, student outcomes and whole-school measures. It is important that evaluation findings are used to inform next steps and ongoing PL needs.

- *How will you know if the professional learning has led to a change in practice and improved learner outcomes?*

Apply learning

Opportunities need to be provided to teachers to apply the learnings from professional learning in their classrooms. A culture of learning supports the successful implementation of this step. Collaboration where teachers reflect on and refine their practice then share their expertise is a key element of this stage.

- *What school structures and processes are in place to support teachers to try new strategies and reflect on their learning?*
- *What formal or informal opportunities are there, for teachers to provide feedback, to reflect and to challenge thinking?*
