

COLLABORATIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING MODEL

Shoulder to Shoulder Learning

Shoulder to shoulder learning is characterised by colleagues working alongside each other in a co-learning relationship. Learning opportunities such as these allow exploration of ideas in real-time and offer the opportunity for discussion and reflection as the task is performed. Shoulder to shoulder learning opportunities are enhanced when colleagues adhere to a chosen focus under exploration, observe each other and gather data while teaching is happening.

Example

Two teachers wish to develop their understanding of guided reading practice. Using student data from one of the classes, they plan a guided reading session. Considerable time is put into thinking about the teaching sequence and effective questioning. The teachers are focused on improving their book orientations and how they manage to gather data on student reading behaviour. While one of the pair teaches the lesson sequence, the other observes, gathering data about student engagement and the book orientation. Notes are also gathered about the teacher's movements during the session to later talk about gathering student data. After the session, the colleagues discuss the teaching episode, bringing together data collected by both teacher and observer. Both consider the impact of their learning on their own future teaching and decide on actions to try before their next shoulder to shoulder learning session.

Models of Effective Practice

Teachers are greatly assisted by opportunities to observe and reflect upon models of effective teaching practice in their own school. A highly effective teacher with deep knowledge of a certain practice who has embedded this practice in daily classroom routines offers the less knowledgeable colleague a guide to how the practice can appear. Opportunities to observe contextualised models of effective practice are greatly enhanced when the observer is able to observe practice in a situation similar to their own. The observer can gather information to consider in relation to their own practice and have the opportunity to discuss the observation with a more knowledgeable colleague or mentor.

Example

A teacher is having difficulty introducing small group instruction into her daily routine. As part of the school's professional development process, this teacher has the opportunity to work alongside a colleague who is highly skilled in small group instruction. The teacher observes a literacy lesson and notes how the small groups are structured, the way the teacher manages the groups and how the learning environment is constructed to enable students to work independently for a period of time. After the observation, the teacher discusses observations with their mentor who works to support them to implement small group instruction into their own practice.

Leadership

Leadership comprises two different but complementary aspects. First it is important that designated leaders attend to those issues that serve to distract teachers from being engaged in teaching and learning or focussing on their own ongoing learning. Designated leaders also work with the teaching staff to ensure that the school vision is shared and that efforts to improve outcomes for students are seen as part of the whole school plan. Designated leaders demonstrate their commitment to ongoing professional learning and are active members of the learning community. This element also focuses on the role of teachers as leaders, where individuals and groups are proactive and empowered to work with each other to lead professional learning and support change. The goal of this aspect is to allow staff to lead the improvement processes in their school and have an active voice in the decisions that affect their work.

Examples

- The staff is involved in an inquiry process focussed on improving the teaching and learning of spelling across the school. A teacher, who attended an interstate conference, has heard about new knowledge and practices that she considers may help the school's investigation. At the next Professional Learning Community meeting she shares her knowledge and suggests that she and another staff member continue to investigate the new practices in an effort to explore their usefulness for their school as potential whole school pedagogies.
- Knowing that the system is about to put funding and resources behind the science learning area, the principal alerts the leadership team to the potential clash the school may experience given their current focus in numeracy education. After reviewing the school's data, noting the results of students in both numeracy and science, the leadership team agrees to continue their numeracy focus and not seek additional funding to explore the science initiative. They assign a member of the leadership team to monitor the new system focus and consider a future involvement in the initiative.

Action Learning

Teachers require an inquiry mindset if they are to engage with and support each other to continually improve the programs and processes used in their school. Action learning allows teachers to engage in a robust problem solving process using comprehensive data, professional literature and their own experience to contextualise a solution to an instructional question at their school. Action learning processes allow staff to trial and review potential solutions for a sustained period of time to ensure that they are right for their particular school.

Example

After reviewing the school's student outcomes data, the staff decides to focus on improving the teaching of number concepts. The teachers explore their own practice, the practices used in nearby schools and engage in professional learning events in order to determine a way forward. Student data is collected and the new pedagogies are trialled. Ongoing discussions determine fine tuning and more trialling so that the new pedagogies find the best fit in their own school setting. Throughout this process, teachers engage in in-situ research sharing observations, opinions and assessments on the new pedagogies and their own ability to use them. At some point after the new way of working is embedded in school practice, data is collected to verify that student outcome improvement has been the result.

Professional Learning Communities and Professional Learning Community Meetings

An informed collaborative culture is characterised by professional discourse and shared understandings about effective teaching and learning where teachers seek informal and formal opportunities for collaborative problem solving. This is achieved when teachers have a shared vision for the school, accept co-responsibility for the learning of all students and understand the importance of their own ongoing learning.

Examples

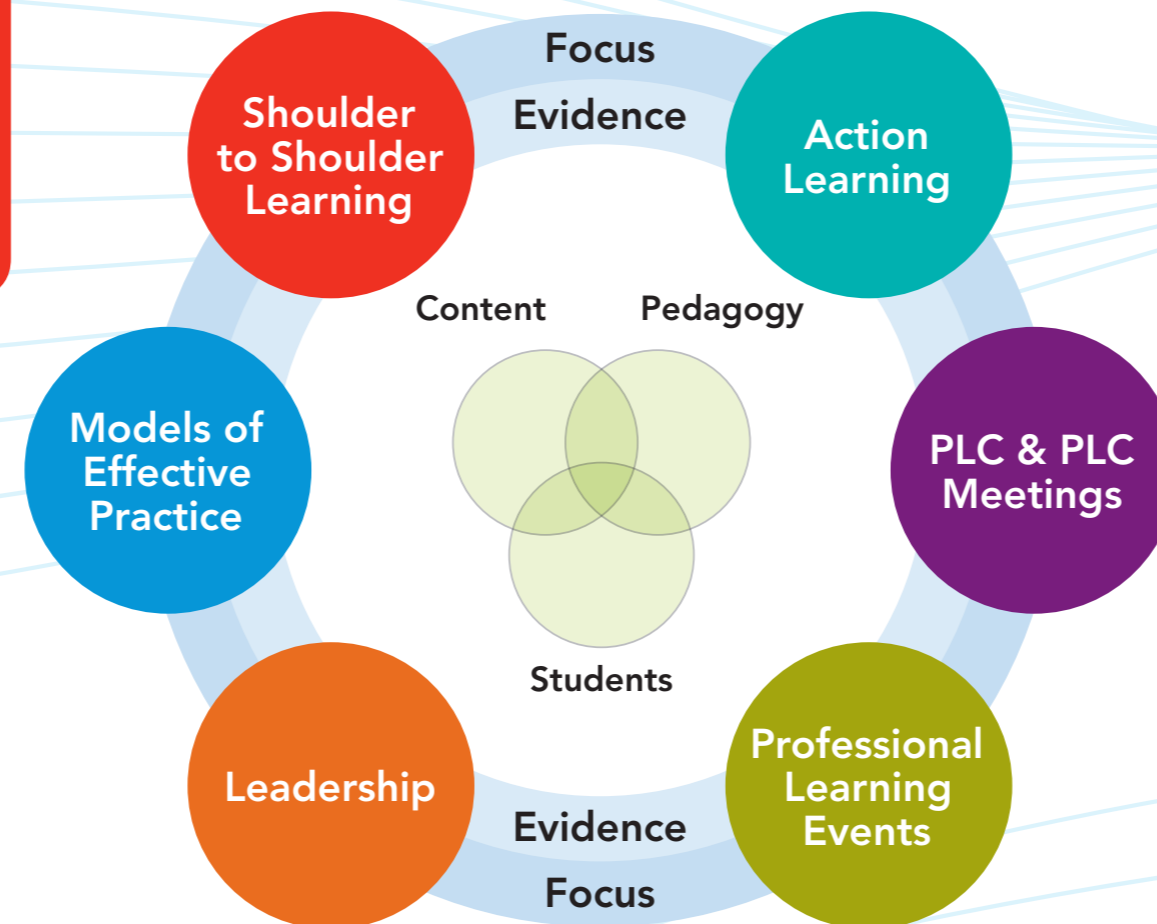
- Led by a classroom teacher interested in the current school focus, the staff gathers for their fortnightly professional learning community meeting. They bring current student data to analyse to ensure that their efforts to improve reading ability are working. During the meeting, they discuss a journal article and break into small groups to analyse their own data. To conclude the meeting, the teachers discuss the learning they will take away from the meeting and the implications for them in their own classrooms.
- A group of teachers meet on their walk from their classroom to the staff room for morning tea. Their animated conversation focuses on a recent teaching episode that reflects the school's current improvement focus. The most animated teacher is the teacher who, after experiencing a very successful lesson, recounts what happened. Those listening quiz the teacher to discuss what exactly made it successful. One teacher makes links to a journal article discussed at a recent professional learning community meeting.

Professional Learning Events

There will be times, depending on the knowledge available at the school, when outside expertise will need to be accessed in order to move the thinking and learning forward. Seeking outside assistance can take many forms such as conferences, workshops, school visits, professional reading and multimedia. Depending on the purpose of the professional learning event, professional development can be targeted to whole groups, small groups or individual staff members.

Examples

- As a way of getting some input into possible solutions to improve the teaching of Religious Education in their school, a small group of teachers go on a tour of five local schools. As they visit each school, they observe classroom teaching, discuss each school's journey with key staff members and talk to the students about the Religious Education program. This group of teachers present their findings to their whole staff as a stimulus for further investigation.
- Wanting to seek further expertise in the area of assessment, a staff member discovers that an international academic will be in town in the near future. The Leadership Team decides that such an experience would be worthwhile for the whole staff and enrolls all staff members in the day of workshops. A process for reviewing the workshop material is planned with the aim of evaluating and potentially integrating some of the new knowledge into their current practice.



Evidence

A range of analysed and considered evidence is important in ensuring that the investigations undertaken by the staff are rigorous and comprehensive. During each investigation, the staff uses various forms of evidence, including student outcome data, to:

- decide on a focus of investigation
- substantiate the choice of direction taken
- verify whether or not the chosen intervention is making a positive difference
- monitor the effectiveness of the intervention over time

Focus

The school focus serves to draw each element of the Collaborative Professional Learning model together in a practical way to align learning opportunities. The focus enables teachers to engage in deep learning for sustained periods of time rather than engage in one-off disconnected learning opportunities. Posing the focus as an instructional question such as, 'How do we ensure that all children can read and comprehend a variety of texts?', helps to engage an inquiry mindset and ensures that both theory and practice form a part of all investigations.

