



It's always a matter of context: Collaborative Professional Learning in Action

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Introduction

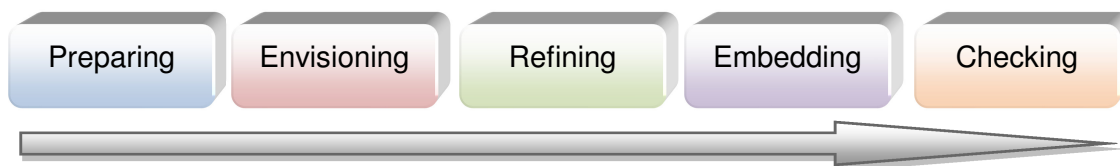
The Collaborative Professional Learning in Action model sits alongside and works synergistically with the Collaborative Professional Learning model. It outlines a process that guides schools as they develop, refine and embed solutions to pedagogical questions that build on the strengths already present in their school. The process enables schools to work contextually considering the factors, conditions and resources that are particular to their school as they refine whole-school teaching and learning practices for the students at their school site.

Collaborative professional learning requires schools to align the energy and commitment to improvement across the staff, assisting them to move forward and avoid being distracted by fads, new resources and quick fixes. Bringing together the various professional development processes, such as workshops, classroom visits, professional learning community meetings and professional reading, it focuses staff on an identified pedagogical question and allows them the time to consider the complexities of teaching and learning in a particular area of the curriculum.

The process focuses on deep learning rather than overlaying a new way of doing over an old way of thinking. It places the teacher in the key role of decision maker regarding classroom teaching improvement by re-establishing the balance between professional practice and professional knowledge. The more teachers engage with this process the more knowledgeable and reflective they become. This is essentially the key to upskilling the teaching workforce and ultimately to improving outcomes for students.

Collaborative Professional Learning in Action

There are five main phases to the Collaborative Professional Learning in Action model: Preparing, Envisioning, Refining, Embedding and Checking. As professional learning communities move through the phases, the model serves to focus participants on a process for bringing about change while avoiding prescribing simple solutions or one form of best practice.



Preparing

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Before schools engage in this process of pedagogical renewal, they need to take the time to investigate their school data to determine what it is that they most need to focus on in order to improve student outcomes. Sources of data can include the results of student assessments, the needs of the community and the capacity and experience of the staff. Schools may also need to consider current political and educational agendas or compliance issues that need to be addressed.

Using this broad knowledge of their school and their students, educators are able to define a focus for their learning that they believe will create valuable and worthwhile improvements for their school community and in student outcomes. This focus is worded in terms of an instructional question to ensure that their focus remains where it can have the most impact: on their teaching practice. This focus brings about the alignment of various activities that the school will engage in order to solve the instructional problem. This alignment is important as it enables teachers to ensure that they can achieve deep learning in a particular area rather than being subject to a range of surface level learning engagements.

Examples of Instructional Problems

How can we help all students develop a flexible and deep understanding of number concepts in Mathematics?

How can we ensure that all students have the capacity to effectively comprehend a variety of texts?

How can we support all students to actively engage in scientific inquiry?

Envisioning

Envisioning

Once an instructional problem has been articulated, it is important that the school staff consider the current reality of teaching and learning at the school. For this reason, schools spend time assessing the current teaching and learning practice that exists at the school before considering what else could be used to improve practice. The Collaborative professional Learning in Action model calls for schools to 'look in' before 'looking out' while emphasising the need to improve by building on rather than improve by replacement.

During the early weeks of engagement at this phase, teachers engage in various activities designed by the school to take stock of existing practice and knowledge. During these weeks, teachers engage in classroom explorations alongside colleagues noting exemplary practice that should be discussed and shared, they consult reference material in order to develop a language around exemplary teaching and debate why what they do works in their particular context. When complete, educators have a clear understanding of what works well at the school in relation to the instructional problem. This not only serves to ensure that current exemplary practice remains part of the instructional program but also to celebrate the knowledge and expertise that exists within the teaching staff.

With the aim to improve the current situation, teachers turn their attention to what else is possible. During the later weeks of this phase, teachers consult the authoritative pedagogy in relation to the school focus, trawling websites, educational literature and conference workshops and visiting nearby schools in an effort to determine what can be integrated into existing practice in order to improve teaching and learning leading to improved student outcomes. During these weeks, teachers engage in discussion and debate over educational literature, spot-trial ideas that surface and begin to fashion a complete school-based solution that will lead to improvement. By the end of this phase, teachers document the solution, citing the idea that *at this particular time, for this particular staff, with our particular resources,*

for these particular students, this is the best solution. Once articulated, the solution is locked down and a decision point has been reached.

Refining

Refining

This phase calls for teachers to refine the original thinking, to understand the needs of teachers and students in order to ensure that the solution is appropriate for the current context. It demands that teachers become field researchers, problem-solving individually or in groups so that the solution is tried and tested. As teachers tinker with the proposed school-based solution, they work shoulder to shoulder, trialling, reflecting and discussing. Data is collected as pre and post-assessment of student performance so that the staff can be confident that the pedagogical change will lead to improvement in student outcomes.

The end result of this phase is the documentation of the whole-school approach to improvement relating to the original focus. The documentation calls for whole school commitment to practice knowing that if the improved practice is sustained over-time, improvement in student learning will result. When all is considered, a new decision point has been reached marking the end of the refining stage. All staff are able to articulate the new practice, are aware of the resources and structures that will support them and have the confidence (and the data) to know that they will make a difference. At this point, the school has reached universal acceptance of and commitment to a new school-wide practice.

Embedding

Embedding

The notion of embedding practice is essential for whole-school alignment and sustainability. Too often schools engage in pedagogical renewal but do not provide the resources and time needed to ensure that the practice can be embedded. This phase reflects an understanding that change requires discussion, reflection and action over a period of time. Whilst this phase has a lesser cognitive load in terms of problem-solving, it does have a higher level of action, calling for staff to put the solution into practice. For this reason, there are two aspects of this phase, compliance and support.

A documented approach to whole-school practice demands acceptance by the staff. At this time, the staff assess their current experience and expertise in order to determine improvement plans for individual staff members so that they are equipped with appropriate levels of ability and knowledge to engage in the improved practice. The staff also reviews resourcing levels and learning environments to ensure that the teachers have all that is required in order to engage in the practice articulated in the school documents. Steady and confident leadership is important at this critical stage in order to navigate the distribution of support and guidance so that all teachers have the ability to engage in the school-wide practice. In terms of performance management, teachers must be able to articulate their current levels of knowledge and skills in relation to the school wide practice and determine their needs in order to participate actively in the approach. High expectations and zero tolerance of deviation are essential if the school-wide approach to teaching and learning is to be sustained. Teachers engage in adaptive and comprehensive professional support so that they gain the skills and knowledge required to embed the school-wide practice.

The result of this phase is commitment and enthusiasm for school-wide learning and a comprehensive whole school approach to teaching and learning. The result is another decision point. A decision to sustain the approach and begin again to improve another facet of the whole-of-school teaching and learning program.

Checking

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At some point in the future, determined by the level of change required by the new school-wide approach, the staff engage in review processes to determine that the approach remains part of classroom practice and that there is evidence of improving student performance. As is always the case with school improvement, constant review and evaluation are scheduled at appropriate times to ensure that the improvement is effective.

Conclusion

The improvement journey is never-ending, calling for educators to be forever on the lookout for ways to improve their teaching and improve learning for students. Experience of this model in many schools suggest that sustained adherence to one change agenda at a time provides room for deep discussion, action and reflection. However, it is possible for a new focus to be envisioned at the same time that the current focus is being embedded given the cognitive intensity required by these phases. The envisioning phase is cognitively intense whilst the embedding phase is more about doing than problem-solving.

This model seeks to re-establish levels of professionalism that have been somewhat stripped back over the past years. At the heart of this model is a determination to empower teachers to make decisions that affect their work, provide time to really improve instruction and celebrate the knowledge and expertise that exists within the current teaching workforce.

The Collaborative Professional Learning in Action model allows schools to be self-directed, with staff determining their own solutions to the instructional problems that they face on a daily basis. For this reason, staff have an emotional connection to the task and a real reason to fashion a solution to the questions that they ask. This self-direction can take place within a systemic structure that aims to support the development of school-wide approaches to improving teaching and learning.

The Collaborative Professional Learning in Action model provides guidance for schools to undertake a comprehensive pedagogical improvement process that ultimately leads to sustained practice and improved student performance. The model calls for four things: Time to engage in reflective practice, Integrated and comprehensive support structures for teacher learning, unwavering whole school commitment and persistent and brave leadership. With these elements, change will occur and the collaborative professional learning in action model will achieve its potential in bringing about contextualised pedagogical renewal.

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