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# Teaching and learning

## Guidelines for professional learning



# Professional learning

A key determinant of student achievement is the quality of teaching. Teachers need to engage in effective, ongoing professional learning. This assists them in developing progressively higher levels of expertise so as to improve student achievement.

Teachers' engagement in effective professional learning:

- deepens understanding of the subject area/s and content taught
- improves knowledge of how students learn
- builds a repertoire of teaching practices that can be used to teach specific subject matter
- improves the selection of the teaching practice most suitable for progressing student learning
- provides opportunities to examine and challenge assumptions about particular teaching practice and its effect on student performance
- results in improved student learning.

Professional learning and development is an individual and collective responsibility. For each school, it is an investment in the support of school improvement priorities. It is integrated into the culture and operation of the school, local networks and region.

## Five principles of effective professional learning

Recent research has focused on the characteristics of successful professional learning. These characteristics are made explicit in the following principles. Key steps in applying each of these principles are also outlined.

1. Professional learning is focused on what students are to learn and on their learning outcomes.
  - Build content expertise.
  - Build understanding of how to deal with the challenges students have in learning the material.
2. Professional learning is focused on teacher practice and built into the day-to-day work of teaching.
  - Involve teachers in:
    - analysing the differences between actual student performance and the goals and standards for student learning
    - identifying what they, as teachers, need to learn
    - designing their professional learning experiences.
3. Professional learning is informed by the best available research and multiple sources of data.
  - Develop understanding of the theory underlying new knowledge and skills to enable sustained improvement in teacher practice.
  - Use multiple sources of data, including student achievement data, to determine focus areas for professional learning.
  - Build knowledge and understanding of how to use data to guide improvement in teaching and learning.

4. Professional learning is organised around collaborative problem solving.
  - Build a school-wide culture of professional learning.
  - Build professional learning teams with strong relationships between teachers, and between teachers and school leaders, to support:
    - active reflection on their own practice
    - feedback to colleagues
    - changes in practice.
  
5. Professional learning is intensive, ongoing and supported with follow-up.
  - Include support from sources both internal and external to the school.
  - Provide support over significant time frames to sustain teacher learning and change in classroom practice.
  - Encourage every teacher to take personal responsibility for engaging in professional learning.

## Models of professional learning

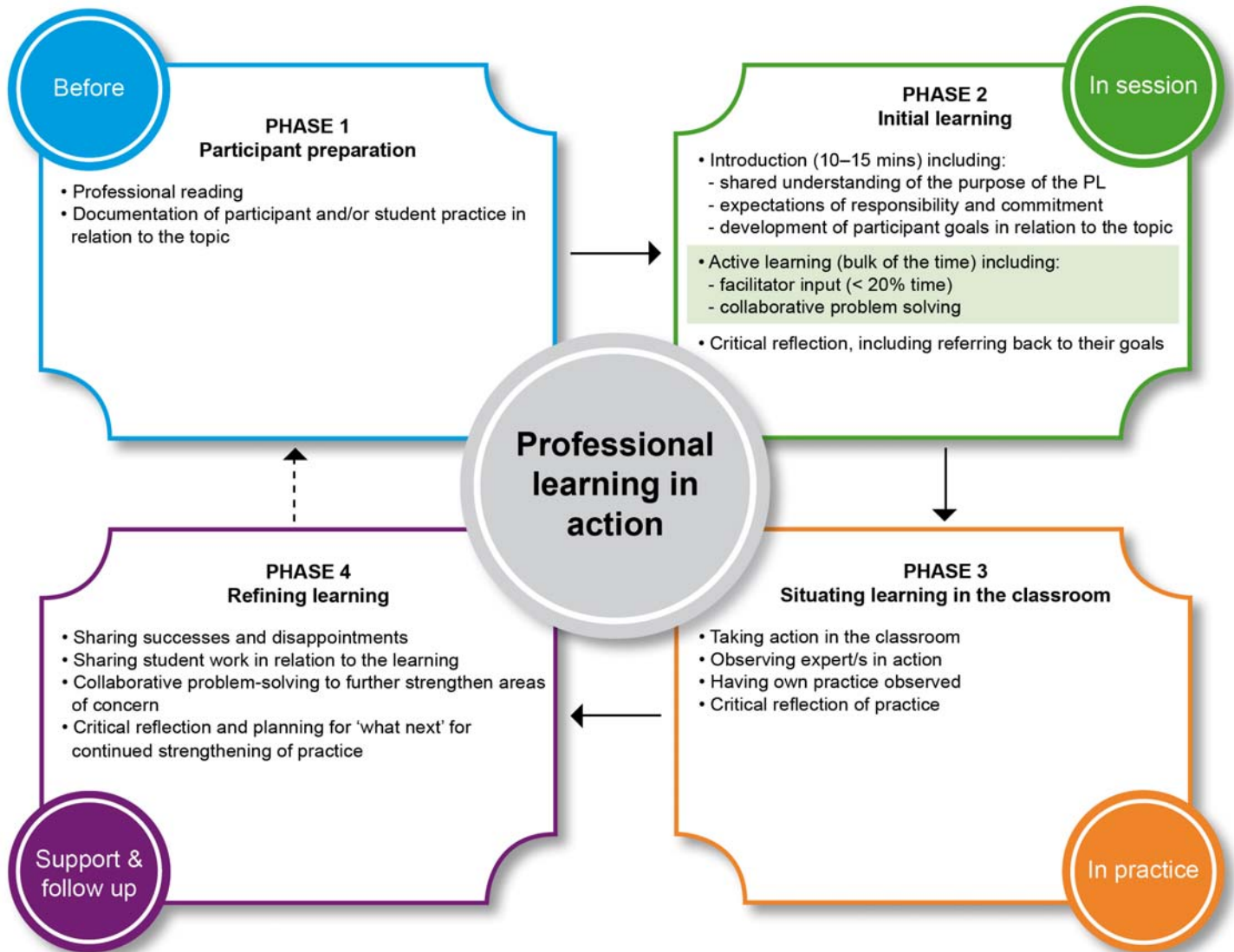
There are many different models for improving teacher practice and student learning. Three highly effective options are outlined below:

- a) Action research encourages teachers to investigate and better understand their own work. The examination of teacher practice drives the action-research process. It is a cycle based on continuous learning, which involves: selecting the focus; planning; acting on the plan; observing and collecting data; analysing; reflecting; re-planning and responding with new action.
  
- b) Professional learning teams contribute significantly to schools becoming learning communities by fostering a culture of collaboration and collective responsibility. Collaboration may involve examining student work, case discussion, study groups, lesson study and peer observation. Teams need to carefully plan the process they follow to achieve their objectives. This process includes strategies for collecting student data, the preparation of action plans, procedures for implementation, and methods of evaluating the effect on their teaching practice and on student learning.
  
- c) Peer coaching promotes professional learning by assisting teachers and school leaders to build their skill and understanding. Peer coaches work with individuals and/or small groups. They provide planned and ongoing support that is targeted to identified needs at a particular point in time and reflects the specific school context. Coaching involves building professional relationships, using data and evidence, engaging in substantive conversations and providing purposeful instruction with a focus on school improvement.

Other models of professional learning include mentoring, working with external consultants or critical friends, structured or personal professional reading, online learning, professional conversations, in-house programs, external workshops/conferences and accredited courses.

## Professional learning in action

Schools may use a single model or combination of models to meet their professional learning needs. The following example, *Professional learning in action* is a model that incorporates the principles of effective professional learning. As part of their preparation, teachers would identify their professional learning needs prior to actioning this model.



An explanation of the four phases of *Professional learning in action* follows:

### Phase 1: Before — participant preparation

- The facilitator identifies pre-requisites for the session, such as:
  - professional reading
  - documentation by participants of their current teacher practice and student learning in relation to the topic.

## **Phase 2: In session — initial learning**

### ***Introduction (10–15 mins)***

- The participants reach agreement about why this learning is important. Considerations include:
  - the purpose and nature of the professional learning
  - what teachers will be able to do as a result of the learning.
- Participants develop their goals for learning, and the facilitator assists them to:
  - analyse and reflect on their current practice in relation to the topic
  - analyse and reflect on their students' learning in relation to curriculum expectations
  - identify what they need to learn as a result of the above analyses
  - commit to applying the new learning in their own classroom practice.

### ***Body of session***

- The facilitator encourages active learning and:
  - provides input, modelling and/or examples (ideally no more than 20% of the total time)
  - engages participants in collaborative problem solving, reflection, group dialogue and hands-on activity.

### ***Closing***

- The group undertakes critical reflection on their learning, and refers back to their goals for the session.
- Support networks (peers and mentors) are established.

## **Phase 3: In practice — applying learning in the classroom**

- Participants:
  - implement their learning in the classroom
  - are encouraged to make use of existing professional learning networks
  - are encouraged to observe an expert in the targeted practice
  - are encouraged to have their own practice observed. (Colleagues observing and debriefing each other can be a powerful learning prompt.)
  - collect a range of samples of student work as evidence of what happened when they applied the new learning.

## **Phase 4: Support and follow up — refining learning**

- In small groups, teachers share successes and disappointments and samples of student work as evidence of what worked well and what did not.
- They work collaboratively to capitalise on successes and work through disappointments.
- They critically reflect on how their teaching practice has been strengthened and plan for 'what next'.

To see how this model has been applied to particular curriculum areas go to:

- School-based Professional learning (PL) pack — [Mathematics: Statistics P–7](#)
- School-based Professional learning (PL) pack — [English: Understanding persuasion P–10](#).

## References:

Hawley, D and Valli, L 1999, 'The Essentials of Effective Professional Development: A new consensus' in L. Darling-Hammond and G. Sykes (Eds) *Teaching as the Learning Profession: Handbook of Policy and Practice* (pp.127-150). Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco.

Hattie, J and Timperley, H 2007, 'The power of feedback' in *Review of Educational Research*, 77 (1), 81-112.

Ingvarson, L, Meiers, M and Beavis, A 2005, 'Factors affecting the impact of professional development programs on teachers' knowledge, practice, student outcomes and efficacy' in *Education policy Analysis Archives*, 13(10), 1-26. (online).

[http://research.acer.edu.au/professional\\_dev/1/](http://research.acer.edu.au/professional_dev/1/) [accessed January 2011].

Desimone, L 2009, 'Improving impact studies of teachers' professional development: Towards better conceptualisations and measures' in *Educational Researcher*, 38(3), 181-199.

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Helen Timperley, Aaron Wilson, Heather Barrar, and Irene Fung *Teacher Professional Learning and Development: Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration (BES)* University of Auckland New Zealand Ministry of Education Wellington, New Zealand p xxxi 2007 (online)

<http://educationcounts.edcentre.govt.nz/goto/BES> [accessed January 2011].

The departmental policy [SDV-PR-001: Employee Professional Development](#) outlines parameters for professional development for employees, including processes for:

- planning, monitoring and reviewing employee professional development
- release time for teachers
- guidelines for school/work unit and individual professional development plans
- study and research assistance.

## Attachment 1: A guide for principals

Principals create a vibrant, sustainable culture of learning focused on improving student achievement. They ensure that the five principles of effective professional learning are reflected in school-based learning events.

The following checklist may be useful in planning and evaluating professional learning.

	Communicate a clear vision of the intended purpose and nature of the professional learning and encourage staff to share that vision.
	Foster an environment that values sharing, trust, risk-taking, experimentation, collaborative inquiry and self-assessment.
	Develop a whole-school framework for professional learning that allows for a variety of learning needs and specialised subject knowledge.
	Use a collaborative inquiry process for analysing student data as one source for identifying professional development needs.
	Develop the expertise of key people to lead professional learning relevant to areas of specialised practice (that is, in the teaching and assessment of English, mathematics and science).
	Identify a range of professional learning providers and resources that align to the school's developing performance plans.
	Provide learning opportunities for teachers to develop the knowledge, practices and attitudes that are needed to achieve agreed goals and expectations.
	Facilitate opportunities for staff to learn from each other.
	Recognise that it takes time to translate new learning into practice and provide access to specialised knowledge and extensive practice.
	Model continuous learning in your own practice.
	Evaluate the impact of professional learning on improving student achievement.