

## **Leadership for Professional Learning**

*By Eric J. Feeney and Kristen Holden*

Cultures of success are built and sustained on a foundation of continuous professional learning as part of an improvement cycle. In the absence of continuous learning, we are bound to confront the same problems in our practice with the same knowledge and depth of understanding as years past. Even if we are equipped with more sophisticated tools—for example, technology, strategic plans, resources and scientific research-based programs—to address problems of practice, it will have minimal impact on changing teachers' knowledge, attitude and beliefs in practice, thus failing to improve student achievement. In our view, we must challenge how we work, position ourselves and participate in the process of professional learning as a practice.

Learning is highly influenced by the role we play, how we are positioned and how we participate in the process. For example, traditional models of professional development (PD)—including workshops, in-service days, conferences and graduate coursework—are designed in ways that position teachers as deficient and in need of development and training. The typical role teachers play and how they participate in conventional forms of professional development is one of gathering knowledge—usually delivered by an evaluator or expert—to fill a perceived deficit or gap between what research says is best practice and teachers' practices.

Sykes characterizes the inadequacy of conventional professional development as “the most serious unsolved problem for policy and practice in American education today.”<sup>1</sup> An important question to ask about this model is: “How can we reframe training to maximize active ongoing learning?” The authenticity of teachers' professional learning can be gauged by opportunities for active learning, such as actively engaging in meaningful analysis of teaching and learning strategies.

## **Conceptions of professional development**

According to Ann Webster-Wright, one of the limitations in the way PD is conceptualized derives from the teacher being deficient and in need of being developed and directed rather than teachers engaging in authentic, self-directed learning.<sup>2</sup> One important aspect of reframing PD is to focus on learning rather than development.

Professional learning shifts from a transmission model of professional development in which teachers are viewed as deficient and in need of training through knowledge being prepackaged and delivered by an expert. A sociocultural approach guides us in challenging how we work, position ourselves and participate in the process of professional learning as a practice.

## **Sociocultural perspective on teacher learning**

In what ways can we reposition ourselves and participate in the process of professional learning to create a culture of success? From a sociocultural perspective, learning happens by changing in participation in socially organized activities and individuals' use of knowledge as an aspect of their participation in social practices.<sup>3</sup> A social perspective on whatever form learning takes places it in the context of our day-to-day experiences. Participation in learning changes your ability to participate, belong and negotiate meaning. The social configuration with respect to practices and communities shapes your identity.<sup>4</sup>

The following terms are foundational elements defined within the context of creating cultures of success:

**Authentic professional learning** is cultural and contextual<sup>5</sup> and can be described as learner centered, collaborative, embedded, ongoing and related to genuine problems in teachers' practice.<sup>6</sup>

**Situated learning** is the experience of actively constructing learning through everyday practice related to real activities, which implies participation in real situations.<sup>7</sup> Learning is seen

as being more closely linked to the circumstances of its acquisition in the workplace.<sup>8</sup>

**Practice** is situative and related to “learning teaching rather than learning to teach, because the infinitive form can suggest that the action is to occur in the future, after something is learned, while learning teaching leaves the possibility that learning also can occur during the work.<sup>9</sup> Practice is about developing an identity as a teacher with certain assumptions and beliefs through participation within a community.<sup>10</sup>

### **Leadership for learning model**

The leadership for learning model stems from a sociocultural perspective to support authentic professional learning. The conceptualized model (see Table 1 below) guides our work in helping to support educators by challenging how we work, position ourselves and participate in the process of professional learning as practice. Our hope is that we can begin to challenge the underlying assumptions, values and beliefs that influence educators’ work by engaging them in meaningful professional learning as part of a continuous improvement cycle.

We recognize there are limitations to our model regarding problems of scale—for example, time and resources) and the potential risk of possible misunderstandings and incompatible assumptions, along with varying interpretations of what this looks like in action. Given these limitations, however, our model is aligned with the consensus that has emerged on core features of what makes professional development effective.<sup>11</sup>

Our belief is that how we work, position ourselves and participate in the process of professional learning prevents us from sustaining cultures of success that would consistently lead to improved student achievement. Because learning is highly influenced by the relationship of how we are positioned and how we participate in the process, it is vital that the role we play (position) and how we participate (relationship) align with the intended goal of any initiative to change teachers’ classroom practice for the better, ultimately leading to improved student achievement.

Using the leadership for learning model, if the goals of a PD initiative are collective learning and capacity building, but the role or position of the learner is to receive mandated training on a scientifically research-based program from the top down, the likelihood of achieving these outcomes will be significantly limited, if not impossible.

The leadership for learning model is not intended to be a how-to guide, recipe or taxonomy of what makes professional development effective. The dichotomous representation of these ideas, however, has become an effective tool in addressing several barriers to framing the work we perform in regards to authentic professional learning situated in practice.

This model has helped address some of the problems of scale through mutual engagement, communities of practice connections—for example, schools, PD providers, teachers and administrators—and changes to the rules learners play and how they participate in training sessions. The model also helps connect to various learners' perspectives and take advantage of their experiences, while also having the flexibility to accommodate different viewpoints.

In our work to create cultures of success, we continually strive for learners to position themselves in the proper role—for example, partner, connector and assimilator—while participating in collaborative professional learning.

Gaining professional knowledge is not about having teachers transfer into practice what the experts have determined to be the most important knowledge based on what has worked in other schools. Teachers engaged in authentic professional learning make sense of and understand the knowledge as it relates to their situation.

Knowledge is not something that is static and can be contained and then transferred into practice in a neat little package. From our investigation of teachers' professional learning, we have discovered that knowledge used in practice is complex and cannot be fully understood outside of practice.

Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly use the metaphor of professional knowledge

landscapes<sup>12</sup> to demonstrate the breadth and complexity of teachers' practice knowledge. In their view, there is a mix of personal, ethical, intellectual and social dimensions. Teachers' use of professional knowledge in practice is a complex interaction of many interrelated factors—for example, attitudes, beliefs, policies and context. Professional knowledge in practice encompasses a holistic experience that surpasses our capability to understand it in isolation. As Mark Smylie noted, "We will fail ... to improve schooling for children until we acknowledge the importance of schools not only as places for teachers to work, but also as places for teachers to learn."<sup>13</sup>

If we want cultures of success that consistently lead to valued teacher and student outcomes, then we will need to challenge how we participate and position ourselves in the process of professional learning.

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**\*See below for Table 1: Leadership for Learning Model<sup>14</sup>**

<p>Director</p>  <p><i>Isolated</i></p>	<p>Goal: Efficiency is paramount</p> <p>Completing tasks: If everyone would just do their job, the system would run smoothly and efficiently. We just need clear expectations mostly evident in policies, procedures, documents and tools.</p>
<p>Evaluator/expert</p>  <p><i>Top down</i></p>	<p>Goal: Accountability is paramount</p> <p>Mandating change: Let me tell you what the research says about best practice, and then you go implement it in your classroom.</p>
<p>Broker</p>  <p><i>Collegial</i></p>	<p>Goal: Having the best ideas is paramount.</p> <p>Exchanging ideas: Just need tools and ideas; no time for mutual engagement. Don't have a lot of time for dialogue, so give me some strategies and tools that have worked for you. I will let you know how it goes.</p>
<p>Partner</p>  <p><i>Parallel</i></p>	<p>Goal: Collective learning is paramount</p> <p>Shared understanding: Co-construction and ownership of meaning through mutual engagement using common terms or language.</p>
<p>Connector</p>  <p><i>Network</i></p>	<p>Goal: Capacity building is paramount</p> <p>Capacity building: Connecting communities and understanding practices through collective inquiry and mutual engagement. Finding connections that combine participation, tools and practice. Taking advantage of diversity.</p>
<p>Assimilator</p>  <p><i>Cultural</i></p>	<p>Goal: Identities of participation are paramount</p> <p>Reculturing (cultural shift): Challenging tacit understandings, underlying assumptions, attitudes, values and beliefs. Who we are and how we contribute to teaching and learning.</p>