CO-DESIGNED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING IN THE CLASSROOM: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR REFLEXIVE AGENCY

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Mary Ryan, et al share the outcomes and benefits of co-designed professional learning between researchers and classroom teachers...

Professional Learning (PL) for teachers is an increasing area of interest due to the complex nature of our profession. Professional Learning is different to Professional Development (PD) as it can be tailored for individual teachers and include informal conversations, adaptive release learning that teachers do in their own time, and/or collaborative research in schools. PL provides opportunities to support teachers' work, the learning needs of students, changing curricula and the demands of external assessment regimes in the contemporary landscape. The proliferation of PD for teachers, often denies the contextual experiences and expertise of teachers in favour of prescriptive top-down approaches. However, in our research alongside primary teachers, we used PL to show how co-design between teachers and researchers can have a real impact on teacher agency, practice and, consequently, student learning.

In a recent journal article, we reported on our research and PL program with primary teachers on the teaching of writing. Our research design included a discovery phase to find out what was happening for students and teachers regarding writing. Next, we engaged in a co-design process with teachers so they could better understand the conditions that were enabling or constraining writing and developed action plans to trial and evaluate. You may also be interested in our WORD project website. Our findings have broader implications for PL programs in schools.

KEY INGREDIENTS OF EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Two major reviews of PL literature, including Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) in the US and Cordingley et al. (2015) in the UK, identified overlapping features of effective Professional Learning that have an impact on practice:

1. a focus on discipline-specific content integrated with both general and content area pedagogical knowledge in a cohesive program of PL;

2. active learning cycles for teachers to design, experiment, reflect and consolidate;

3. expert feedback and support in understanding the content, research evidence and evidence-based practices;

4. collaboration with other teachers to encourage a shared sense of purpose; and

5. sustained duration, typically a year or longer, to provide teachers sufficient time to learn, practice, implement, collect, and analyse evidence, and reflect on their practice.

Recent scholarship has highlighted the value of educational co-design and the way it shapes collaborative partnerships amongst teachers, learners, and researchers (Juuti et al., 2021).

The key theme across the literature is that effective PL offers complex and varied opportunities for collaboration and teacher input. Successful partnerships between teachers and researchers work to recognise the everyday demands teachers face and help them to co-design sustainable methodologies that work in the classroom.

HOW CAN A REFLEXIVITY PROCESS HELP US MAKE THE MOST OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING?

We found reflexivity was a great way to guide a more nuanced approach to Professional Learning to account for the way students and teachers make decisions about learning and teaching, especially in relation to writing. In addition, reflexivity theory (Ar-

cher, 2012) helps us to explain the dynamic contextual conditions that shape any learning and teaching event.

Reflexivity involves deliberating about possible courses of action, weighing up the contextual conditions to decide what might be feasible in this pedagogic situation and then choosing a way forward.

There are three distinct, yet related, conditions that shape, and are shaped by, our engagement in any situation (Archer, 2012). These conditions are Personal, Structural, and Cultural. Personal conditions relate to personal identity; Structural conditions are systems, practices, and resources in this context; and Cultural conditions relate to prevailing beliefs, and expectations in this context. These conditions apply both to teachers and students.

Table 1. Some conditions that influence or are influenced in the classroom

for example, seeking constant affirmation from the teacher or peers about decisions or following the teacher's ideas and/or structures without injecting personal style or voice.

- Autonomous reflexives have a clear idea about their approach to a task and their decision-making leads to direct and quick action; for example, setting a plan that aligns with their favourite approach and not veering from the plan, so they get it finished.

- Meta-reflexives tend to consider the broader context alongside their own goals and past experiences to make decisions that will lead to the best outcome for everyone; for example, meeting the expectations of the task and teacher while pursuing their own priorities at the same time.

Personal conditions in teaching	Structural conditions in teaching	Cultural conditions in teaching
• Identity as a teacher and learner • Confidence and efficacy • Beliefs about teaching and learning • Knowledge and skills	• Curriculum • Planning documents • Timetable • Resources • Language • Everyday practices • Students' wellbeing and approach to learning	• Importance of the subject area • How the purpose of learning tasks is framed • Ideologies of approaches to teaching e.g., explicit teaching, inquiry-based learning, and others • Relationships across school and community • Expectations of parents, school system, government

In our project, we found that students (and teachers) approached decision-making around writing in quite different ways. Archer (2012) calls these modes of reflexivity, which may change in different learning contexts. These reflexive modes are communicative, autonomous, meta-reflexive, and fractured. The modes help us describe the different ways writers take on the task of writing:

- Communicative reflexives - decisions need to be confirmed by others before they lead to action;

- Fractured reflexives find it difficult to make decisions or take purposeful action; for example, disaffected students who are paralysed by language requirements or the perceived enormity of the task.

Each of us can adopt these modes of decision-making at some point and in some contexts, but Archer argues that we generally have a dominant mode. Self-assessment and regulation can be much more

effective if we understand our mode of reflexivity in any given context (Ryan et al., 2022). If teachers recognise their own and students' modes of reflexivity, they can create pedagogic and classroom conditions that support students to enact effective learning decisions.

We found throughout the project, that three key terms were helpful for the teachers to consider in relation to the conditions that might enable or constrain their pedagogy: Know yourself, Know your students, Know your context. Below are some reflexive prompts you may like to consider:

Know yourself	• What do I know about the topic?
	• What do I struggle with or feel I lack knowledge of in relation to the topic?
	• Do I engage in this topic as part of my life? If not, why not?
	• What do I want/need to know?
	• Where can I get support?
Know your students	• Where are the children in my classroom at in relation to this topic?
	• What kind of readers and writers are they?
	• What kinds of texts are they interested in?
	• How can I differentiate/assess where the kids are so I can meet them there and uplift them?
	• How can I draw on the strengths of the children (their diverse knowledge of language other than English, cultural knowledge, experience of this subject matter at home etc) so that I can support their growth in this topic?

Know your context	• What program (other than the mandated curriculum) is in use at my school in this subject area?
	• Does it use a commercial program or rely on external resources?
	• How deep/shallow is my knowledge of the curriculum and policy that influences my pedagogy in this area?
	• How does my school culture support my knowledge and pedagogy?
	• How valued is this topic in the school and community?
	• Do they know enough about it?

FEATURES OF CO-DESIGNED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Because reflexivity foregrounds the impact of context on teaching (including the teacher's own impact on that context), we adopted a co-design approach to the PL element of this study. Our co-design had four parts:

1. We collected and analysed classroom data to understand the nuances of the educational contexts.

2. We helped develop a plan with the participating teachers to support new enacted pedagogies.

3. We worked with the teachers to discuss these action plans and the teachers set their own goals.

4. We had sustained, contextualised discussion with teachers regarding how these actions were working in practice. We provided guidance to teachers in the form of classroom visits and debriefs.

We refer to this process as Co-Designed Professional Learning (CDPL). Our process was iterative: this means we introduced different types of analysis and action as the teachers worked with us to identify their enablers and constraints in teaching writing. For example, we studied the way time was spent

during lessons when the teachers indicated their number one constraint was a lack of time to teach writing well. This process involved recording writing lessons and coding the time to understand the content of talk, how much time was spent on writing vs classroom management, and opportunities for students to discuss their ideas with teachers and peers through dialogic talk. The codes we developed were guided by evidence-based principles for writing pedagogy. This fine-grained analysis allowed us to offer targeted feedback to teachers and support the development of a suite of talk-prompts and time-saving strategies for their writing teaching.

OUTCOMES OF CO-DESIGNED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

In the latter half of the CDPL project, we found that students spent more time writing and focused individually on the writing task. We found that teachers were more aware of time, allowing for more student-centred writing time and less interruptions from the teacher to clarify the task. We also found that the CDPL helped teachers to set goals. Students were observed to remain on task working independently on their writing and talking through their ideas while working. We witnessed higher student engagement in writing and more sophisticated texts. The teachers were more intentional in their pedagogy – using their data and action plans to focus on areas of improvement for themselves and for specific students. The amount of time spent on classroom management was also significantly reduced. Our focus in the project was not on NAPLAN results, but due to the co-design of effective writing pedagogy based on contextual classroom evidence (including teacher knowledge and confidence in teaching writing), student NAPLAN writing results improved significantly for classrooms in this study.

- This CDPL was beneficial for teachers in multiple ways.

- They were able to make sense of complex (personal, structural, cultural) conditions of their classrooms.

- They received in-time guidance about how to account for these dynamic conditions in their teaching.

- They exercised agency through their action plans, pedagogical design, and targeted support for students based on the data. This strengthened their confidence.

- CDPL has the potential for sustainable change, as the teacher develops new, transferrable skills.

The CDPL was beneficial for students in their ability to:

- Write for a clear audience and purpose.

- Make choices related to their writing and write about topics they are interested in.

- Spend more time on writing.

- Receive quality feedback on their writing from teachers and peers.

These findings have important implications for teachers' professional learning and the ways in which schools approach PL programs.

WHERE TO GET RESEARCH SUPPORT?

University researchers are generally keen to work with schools and teachers on programs of professional learning that may also include some research. Search for the expertise you need by looking at Education staff profiles on university websites or feel free to contact the NSW Council of Deans of Education as they would be happy to circulate your request to all NSW universities.

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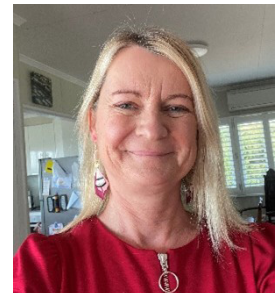
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