

Learning to improve or improving learning: the dilemma of teacher continuing professional development

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Abstract

When learning is at the centre of the teaching enterprise we would assume that the continuing professional development of teachers would be a priority of both education systems and teachers alike. Teachers like other professionals need to update their skill and knowledge base – in the case of teachers their pedagogical skills and content knowledge. In this paper I use three building metaphors to describe current approaches to the continuing professional development of teachers: retooling, remodelling and revitalising. I add a fourth one – re-imagining to indicate the need for teachers themselves to have some agency in identifying priorities and needs for their own professional learning. My argument is that CPD needs to incorporate all four of the elements of retooling, remodelling, revitalising and re-imagining to have two interrelated effects: first to ensure that the goal of improving student learning is achieved and second that a strong and autonomous teaching profession is supported.

Introductionⁱ

I begin this paper with two quotes from teachers giving their vision of teaching in the 21st century. I draw on the voices and experiences of a small group of teachers, and weave their comments into the text of the paper to gain a sense of how they see teaching in the 21st and what kinds of CPD would support them in their schools and classrooms.

We as teachers in the 21st century have a supporting role – facilitating the learning of our students, listening to them and their needs and providing strategies, tools and skills and resources to make learning happen

The first example presents a view of teachers as being supportive with the role of facilitating learning. This is a view that presents the visible and taken-for granted aspects of teaching. It does not question orthodoxies and sees teaching as a form of transmission. CPD for this type of teacher is about retooling, developing skills that will help teachers teach rather than developing them as learners.

The second example could be seen to be on the opposite end of the spectrum.

...flexibility. A teacher needs to be flexible to the every changing environment, including society, technology and the world in which we live. We often find ourselves in different positions, sometimes moulding to these positions and other needing greater flexibility of training.

Change is central and responding to that change represents significant challenges for teachers, requiring flexibility on their behalf. CPD for these teachers is about teacher learning, is transformative in its intent and outcomes. Its remit is not just about a teacher's classroom but rather about social change, where education is a driving force. Sugrue (2004:86) captures the

current tensions facing teachers, which are also implicit in these two quotes. He observes: Evidence tentatively suggests that current pressures and possible overload on teachers' willingness and capacity for continuous learning and improvement have shifted their learning away from more individual and idiosyncratic pursuits and towards more formulaic, frequently prescribed learning routines. Their lives as well as their learning become distorted, and the growth in, and popularity of, emergent learning networks and communities of practice indicates that they are seeking safe spaces where they can begin to exercise more control over their learning, lives and work.

When learning is at the centre of the teaching enterprise we would assume that the continuing professional development (CPD) of teachers would be a priority of both education systems and teachers alike. Teachers like other professionals need to update their skill and knowledge base – in the case of teachers their pedagogical skills and content knowledge. However, teachers can be said to be a particular case – for many of them they have short term and immediate goals that reflect the exigencies of the classroom and the types of daily demands they face from students, parents, education systems as well as their professional peers. These types of demands lead to a pragmatic view of how to invest their time inside and outside of schools and to a practicality ethic that drives their practice inside classrooms and shapes the type of professional learning they prefer. A litmus test for CPD for many teachers could include the following questions: is it useful?, does it improve practice?, does it improve student learning?, does it extend me intellectually, personally or professionally?, does it question orthodoxies, generate new knowledge or transform practice? For some teachers these questions, especially the first three, are taken-for-granted and are deeply embedded into their personal practices and belief systems, while for others the last two questions would be confronting and would require a significant shift in beliefs and practices. Indeed the first two questions relate to traditional forms of CPD while the others focus more on teacher learning. I would suggest that if a CPD activity or program does not recognise the importance of these two transformative questions and the role these play in transforming individual practice, generating new insights about practice and developing the capabilities of teachers and the teaching profession then teachers will remain mere technicians serving the interests of government at the time. Moreover, the focus will probably be on individually directed skills development rather than on a profession-wide enterprise where teacher learning is acknowledged, valued, supported and rewarded.

Grundy and Robison (2004) identify three interconnected purposes of CPD: extension, growth and renewal. Extension is through introducing new knowledge or skills to a teachers repertoire, growth is by the development of greater levels of expertise and renewal is achieved through transformation and change of knowledge and practice. In this paper I identify three metaphors to describe current approaches to the continuing professional development of teachers which reflect Grundy and Robison's above purposes: retooling, remodelling and revitalising. I add a fourth one – re-imagining to indicate the need for teachers themselves to have some agency in identifying priorities and needs for their own professional learning¹. My argument is that CPD needs to incorporate all four of the elements of retooling, remodelling, revitalising and re-imagining to have two interrelated effects: first to ensure that the goal of improving student learning is achieved and second that a strong and autonomous teaching profession is supported.

I organise the paper in two sections: in the first section I develop and elaborate the elements of the four metaphors, while the second part makes some suggestions relating to future

¹ See appendix 1 for a synthesis of the dimensions of these approaches

directions for CPD.

In order to support my argument I use data gained from working with a group of 29 teachers (23 secondary, 4 primary and two teacher educators) who are part of a group of teachers working as a Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools. At a recent meeting of these teachers my colleague Nicole Mockler sought to elicit from these teachers the way in which they see their own professional development and learning. Two strategies were used to gather data: in groups of 6-8 the teachers were asked to choose an image from a pile of postcards (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler 2003) which in some way represents what it is to be a teacher in the 21st Century – to write on the back and then explain and discuss their responses with each other and then a larger group. The second source of data was through a Silent Conversation technique, this is a process that ensures that every voice is given legitimacy, regardless of status. It also provides opportunities for reflection which has a public face.” (Groundwater-Smith and Kelly, 2003). Questions reflecting de Bono’s 6 thinking hats were used get teachers to think about CPD from a number of perspectives.

What PD have you been involved in over the past 2 years? How often? Funded by whom? (*White hat*)

How does a good professional learning experience make you feel? (*Red Hat*)

When PD is at its best, what does it look like? (*Yellow hat*)

What PD is at its worst what does it look like? (*Black hat*)

If you were responsible for designing PL&D, what would it look like and how would it look different? (*Green hat*)

How do you know when a PD experience has been successful? (*Blue hat*)

CPD as retooling

In many respects CPD as retooling has been a dominant form of CPD. This is not surprising at a time when governments want to make teachers more accountable and where standards and competency based regimes dominate education policy. This form of CPD responds to the view that teaching can be improved through the learning and development of new skills. The following statements capture what teachers think:

I feel confident that I am doing what is needed, ... I am sometimes overwhelmed at how much else I could/should be doing.

The outcome of such types of CPD is that teachers feel

Inspired, energised, armed with practical ideas for implementation

For Kennedy (2005) this is a Training Model which supports a skill-based, technocratic view of teaching whereby CPD provides teachers with the opportunity to update their skills in order to be able to demonstrate their competence. It is generally ‘delivered’ to the teacher by an ‘expert’, with an agenda determined by the deliverer and the participant is placed in a passive role (p. 237)

CPD as retooling is very much based in a practical view of teaching, in which relevance and immediate application within classrooms is a prime objective. It sees teachers as the manager of student learning rather than a reflective practitioner who considers how appropriate the pedagogy is for the students s/he teaches. In the words of one teacher “*it supports participants*

to develop the skills and confidence they need to take charge of their own professional learning”.

However, with its focus is on improving instruction it does not allow any consideration of the social and cultural factors which influence the design and delivery of teaching and learning. As Day (1999:139) observes “it is likely to promote a limited conception of teaching and being a teacher”. Concepts of practicality and relevance contribute to the development of instrumentalist ideologies which emphasise a technical approach by providers and consumers of CPD. This form of CPD encourages teachers to see their world in terms of instrumental ends achieved only through the recipes of tried and true practices legitimated by unexamined experience or uncritically accepted research finding (Sachs and Logan 1990:479). For a teacher this type of CPD:

... results in an immediate spin off at the school level, teachers sharing ideas about best practice and how to achieve it ...

Governments and bureaucrats prefer this is type of CPD seeing it as an end in itself. As Guskey (1999) observes they assume professional development is inherently good, and therefore more is always better. However, “simply doing more of the same old stuff, however, is not necessarily better. It can actually lead to diminished results higher levels of frustration and increased cynicism” (Guskey 1999:2)

Dadds (1997) describes this type of CPD as a delivery or empty vessel model. Her major criticism is that:

on their own they are extremely limited because they have little, if anything, to say about the crucial role of teachers’ understandings about, and experiences of children, in the development of their work. Nor do they have anything, to say about the variety and complexity of processes which teachers undergo as they continue to learn about their professional craft; as they continue to gain new knowledge and understanding; reconstruct their attitudes, beliefs, practices; struggle with the difficulties of the change process. (p. 32)

In summary, CPD as retooling can best be described as old style professional development, it is something that is done to teachers, or as Mockler (2001) calls it ‘spray on’ PD. Inevitably these kinds of activities are provided by an outside expert and are mainly concerned with tinkering with practice.

It develops a type of “controlled professionalism” where teachers can best be described as craft workers. At its worst this type of CPD is

Unintellectual – anything redolent of the worst kind of pop psychology, jargon filled with no explanations... 8-3 at the local RSL for a one day wonder session by a visiting guru ... Mars boys are different, left brain right brain, multiple intelligences cross hatched with Blooms taxonomy

CPD as remodelling

Remodelling does not challenge orthodoxies or beliefs, rather it reinforces a practical approach to teaching, where teaching is sometimes seen as a performance and the role of the

teacher is to engage/entertain students. The quote below captures an element of this:

Literally smile, put on an act, entertain, draw on reserves of energy. Conflict between giving too much and burn out and keeping a life balance but still engaged in the process of change and development and renewal. Try something and keep going, enjoy the work and like working with children

Like CPD as retooling, this model is concerned with transmission (Kennedy 2005) but is more concerned with modifying existing practices to ensure that teachers are compliant with government change agendas. It is very much focussed on the enhancement of teachers' content and pedagogical knowledge. One teacher wrote "*it is about learning something new, which is stimulating, applicable and exhilarating*". Helping them to "understand more deeply the content they teach and the ways students learn that content". (Guskey 2003:748). In this respect teachers are very much positioned as the uncritical consumers of expert knowledge.

In Australia and elsewhere, CPD programs are normally provided by the school or district, but on occasion may also be mandated by the State (some changes in syllabuses are examples of this). These programs are usually devised by an external expert, working within existing frameworks and conducted over a period of time. They can best be likened to building a frame and adding on an extension. There has to be compatibility with the existing structure. In terms of teaching these programs ensure continuation between old practices and new ones. One of the shortfalls of these programs is that they may well remodel teachers' behaviours but not necessarily change their attitudes and beliefs about teaching. The limitation of this approach is well captured by this teacher's observation:

Outside experts telling teachers what they should be doing, it is impossible to be encouraged or inspired by this approach – it must be a complete collaborative approach otherwise it is a complete waste of our limited and valuable time

CPD as revitalizing

The following quote captures the fundamental element of teaching as revitalizing. Clearly it is active, challenging and includes students in the learning enterprise.

The child says LOOK AT ME, LISTEN TO ME. I have things to tell you, I have things to share, I WANT to talk to you. I am important. I can contribute. It is about us listening to children and acting on their voice, their opinions, ideas. Involving them in decision- making. See them as the key contributors to society, people who must be listened to. I am not cute, my brain and personality are big, capable and influential

Given this teacher's observations, CPD as revitalizing connects teachers with other teachers and with the needs of students. The difference between this kind of CPD and the two so far presented is that its' focus is primarily on teacher learning, in particular professional renewal through opportunities to rethink and review practices and in so doing become reflective practitioners. When it is at its most successful it "*ensures learning from my colleagues in day-to-day work*" and as one teacher whimsically suggested "*you come away feeling the world is your oyster – a dozen oysters- and affirmed with a dash of challenge*". It demands that teachers are able to engage in reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action (Schön 1987). According to Day (1999:28)

reflection-in-action, "focuses upon the identification and rapid solution of immediately

pressing problems” and reinforces the notion of teacher as artisan. Reflection-on-action occurs both before and after the action. It is a more systematic, considered process of deliberation enabling analysis, reconstruction and renaming in order to plan for further teaching and learning (Day 1999:28).

To this extent its focus is still on the individual teacher but makes teachers “*feel inspired, idealistic – a reminder of what teaching’s all about*”.

Kennedy (2005) calls this kind of CPD transitional, in the sense that the types of CPD characteristic of this model have the capacity to support underlying agendas compatible with either the transmission of transformative models. Under Kennedy’s schema a transitional approach to CPD incorporates a standards-based, coaching/mentoring or community of practices models. Under my schema however, the standards-based model would be included and CPD as retooling as it “belittles the notion of teaching as a complex, context-specific political and moral endeavour; rather it represents a desire to create a system of teaching, ... that can generate and empirically validate connections between teacher effectiveness and student learning (Beyer, 2002: 243, cited in Kennedy 2005: 241). The coaching/mentoring model emphasises the importance of the one-to-one relationship between two teachers, which is designed to support CPD. It involves an equitable relationship which allows the two teachers involved to discuss possibilities, beliefs and hopes (Kennedy 2005). One of its major tenets is that of confidentiality. The community of practice model draws on the work of Wenger (1998) and generally involves more than two people. Importantly, members need to create their own understanding of the joint enterprise, therefore allowing members of that community to assert a certain level of control over the agenda. (Kennedy 2005:245).

Another form of CPD as revitalizing is to be found through professional development networks. Morris, Chrispeals and Burke (2003) argue that two linked processes of CPD can create opportunities for teacher learning and transformation. They claim that external teacher networks that focus predominately on enhancing teachers’ pedagogical knowledge and collaborative and leadership skills in a content area when linked with internal school reform networks and projects can provide the transformative power to alter professional development and teacher learning in power and sustainable ways (p. 764). My teachers saw the strength of this type of CPD in terms of its being collaborative and collegial, and made them ask themselves “*what would learning look like? How would we capture it and gather evidence of it?*” Another benefit was that “*you can share with colleagues and students, adapting to your student community and see positive feedback*”, which is “*reflected in student data and teacher practice*”.

Daley (2000:40-41) lists a variety of tools which can foster a transformative view of learning including: concept maps, reflective journals, vee diagrams, analysis of practice exemplars, action learning and creating professional learning communities. In her view “all can be used to foster a constructivist, transformative, context-based professional practice development program”(p. 40-41) where “the focus is on linking new knowledge to previous experiences, contexts and practices” (p. 41) From a teacher’s perspective the following advice was given to ensure success of a CPD program, “*start small, share experiences, reflect on and build on successes*” and “*has to be carefully targeted towards real needs not those determined by others*”.

CPD as re-imagining

As the name reflects this kind of CPD is different and requires imagination both on the part of those delivering CPD as well as those who are the recipients of it. The extract below is indicative of what it is not like, and the paradox of opposites gives power to this metaphor.

I chose this as an exact opposite. The photo shows what we have built from in terms of student involvement, teaching practice and classroom environment. One wonders whether this lesson was ever a successful one

This type of CDP is transformative in its intent and practice, and will equip teachers individually and collectively to act as shapers, promoters and well informed critics of reforms (Little, 1994:1). It leaves teachers “*energised, ready to try new things ... as though you could take on the world in your classroom the next day*”.

This model of CPD is highly political and serves to advocate and support change from a variety of perspectives and approaches. Thus it “*provides teachers with space and time to pose questions and identify issues that are important to them and their students*”. It is successful when “*there is dialogue beyond the PD session and teachers are thinking/planning how strategies and ideas can be implemented*” and “*when conversations in the classroom continue three days after the PD session*”

Accordingly, at its core it is a transformative view of teacher professionalism which seeks to develop teachers who are creative developers of curriculum and innovative pedagogues (Mockler 2005). Such teachers value divergent and risky thinking in themselves, their colleagues and their students, and in doing so assist their students in the development of their own critical and transformative capacities. Transformative teachers also “collaborate at a deep level with colleagues, students and other stakeholders, and necessary for such collaboration is a willingness to be open to change and transformation in themselves” (Mockler 2005:742)

Given that this is political work, it requires building collaborative partnerships between various stakeholders whose task is to work together, combining their experience, expertise and resources. The strength here is that jointly planned activities are consistently more effective and more efficient than those planned by either school-based or district educators working alone. (Guskey 1999) Education reform networks are a type of collaborative action to support teachers. For Lieberman (2000) these networks are flexible, borderless and innovative, able to create collaborative environments, and focus and develop agendas that grow and change with participants. For teachers these networks “*support open minded inquiry, reflection, they support teachers in validating their knowledge and building on it.*”

CPD as re-imagining demands that educators must have the courage to ask tough questions and have the skills to find honest answers. They must regularly examine all forms of evidence on student learning to identify potential weaknesses in the curriculum or instructional program (Guskey 1999). It requires that teachers “collect and understand evidence about student learning at the classroom and school level, and this information needs to be incorporated into collaborative planning of strategies to remedy identified problems and needs to become a regular part of ongoing, job-embedded professional development” (Guskey 1999:##).

This approach reflects what Richardson (2003:401) describes as an inquiry approach where teachers determine their individual collective goals, experiment with practices, and engage in

open and trusting dialogue about teaching and learning with colleagues and outside facilitators. Its success would be evident when the following teacher aspirations are achieved:

When society is transformed by the students we teach
When there is reflection resulting in an action, change of attitude, or ...
When it promotes that door opening: "What if ..."
When people go away determined to make changes in their own practices as a result
When you can take it, share it with colleagues and then apply it to the classroom
Yes, when it actually makes a difference to student learning and,
when the most disengaged teacher wants to be part of the professional learning experience.

CPD as re-imagining positions teachers as researchers of their own and their peers' practice. It contributes to an understanding of the nature of practice and the improvement and transformation of practice. It provides teachers with opportunities to communicate with their peers in more formal ways so that the reach of their practice and their insights into that moves beyond their own classroom and school to a broader constituency.

This view is clearly re-imagining a set of social relations where teachers and students are cast as learners and working together in a collective endeavour; where risk taking is promoted and supported and where negotiating change and dealing with ambiguity is something that provokes excitement rather than fear and insecurity. It is not an unrealistic utopian vision but rather an aspiration for a strong and confident teaching profession, what elsewhere I have called an activist teaching profession (Sachs 2003).

Future directions for CPD

Thus far I have presented four models of CPD for teachers. It is clear that from my perspective CPD should emphasise teacher learning rather than a deficit based professional development view where PD is 'done to teachers'. Importantly, CPD is not about looking for the grail, or as a panacea to cure the ills of education failure. If this is the case, then, as Guskey (1999) notes, providers need to be careful not to focus on the symptoms, as a retooling and a remodelling approach would assume, but rather have the ability to identify the need and develop approaches that help respond to that need.

A current dilemma of practice is that much of the recent literature advocates re-imagining but the experience of practice is more towards a technocratic and instrumental form of CPD. We need to ask why this is so? There can be several answers to this: first is that education is political, and a regulated, skilled and compliant teaching profession is probably in the interests of governments and bureaucracies. While schools do not necessarily deliver votes to politicians, failing students, evidence of falling standards certainly provide heat for them to respond to. Second, standards and standardization are strong shapers of public opinion. Standards for teaching and standards for teachers are often confused. These words do not do mean the same or do the same conceptual or practical work. For example *teacher* standards are concerned with measuring teacher performance and encompass the work of regulatory standards, while *teaching* standards are about improving teaching through a developmental approach. *Teacher* standards place teachers as objects for measurement, while *teaching* standards focus on teaching as a process that can be improved. (Sachs 2005)

Day and Sachs (2004: 26) make the following observation about the future shape of CPD. They

argue that:

identifying teachers' agendas is crucial to learning and change; that teacher learning needs to be inquiry base oriented, personal and sustained, individual and collaborative, on and off site; that CPD means a range of learning opportunities appropriate to needs and purposes; that these need be supported by school cultures of inquiry and be evidence based, where evidence is collected and interrogated which acknowledges the complex worlds of teaching and learning, teachers and learners; and, that if it is to be effective its direct and indirect results need to be systematically evaluated.

In order to achieve the aspirations of a learning profession, education providers need to ensure that the programs offered match appropriate professional development provision to particular professional needs. (Muijs, Day, Harris and Lindsay 2004:295) The important point here is the need for CPD to be differentiated in the same way as learning is differentiated for students.

Sugrue (2004) argues for this to happen it necessitates that teachers take control over their learning, which is a beginning for them to feel empowered in the process and acquiring a new and emerging confidence to meet new challenges head on and in ways that previously they did not imagine were possible.

Such learning is career stage sensitive, and requires time and space as well as conducive conditions that also need to alter with time, while the external climate creates a context that impinges in marked ways ... (Sugrue 2004:85)

Inherent in this is the link between developing trust and professional judgement as hinges and catalysts for professional learning. To this point I have indicated some of the major themes in the literature, now I briefly synthesise the points made by the teachers I worked with regarding what they want of CPD programs to look like:

- focus on themselves as learners and engage in challenging learning;
- be inspired by sharing ideas and practices while working with colleagues;
- create an intellectual challenge which causes teachers to re-examine their beliefs and practices;
- have the luxury of time to reflect on their learning and in the company of other teachers think about and challenge their assumptions and views of schooling, teaching and learning;
- to connect with what is learnt with real life situations

Returning to the litmus test questions I posed earlier, the type of CPD presented above would satisfy the personal and professional needs of teachers. Clearly, the development and implementation of such activities would require some readjustments in how CPD is presented and where it would be conducted.

As I have said elsewhere (Sachs 2003), a strong teaching profession is one that is self regulating, one where teachers themselves must be committed to investing time and energy in their own continuing professional development. This needs to happen in a context where education systems and employers provide financial support for continuous professional learning to support and sustain a robust and competent teaching profession.

Conclusion

In this paper I have used four metaphors to describe current approaches to CPD. Using data from teachers I have inserted their voice into the paper to give it both a sense of authenticity but also an evidence base to support my argument. Clearly the continuing professional development of teachers is important as a means to maintain and sustain a competent teaching profession. Moreover, at different times it serves different purposes and masters and hence is a political activity. The politics of curriculum content, pedagogy and relationships within schools can all be sites of struggle, which should not be underestimated.

I identified two tracks for CPD; namely a traditional training approach as evident in the retooling and remodelling approaches and a teacher learning orientation as present in the revitalising and re-imagining approaches. Each of these approaches has different forms of provision and delivery and will accordingly have different outcomes and effects both in terms of teacher practices and the type of teacher professionalism emerging from these practices. While on occasion it is appropriate for each of these kinds of teacher CPD to be used to improve teaching quality and teacher effectiveness, teachers for the 21st century need to be autonomous learners as well as skilled practitioners. The re-imagining metaphor links the imperative of learning to improve as well as improving learning. The current situation is one where change is ever present and the ability to manage change and to understand and work with ambiguity are probably core competencies for teachers. The ability to learn with and from colleagues and students is central to this. The building of relationships and the development of trust between stakeholders also ensures that this is achieved.

A well respected teaching profession, who are supported in their professional learning, will ensure that quality student learning outcomes are achieved. Moreover, teachers who are transformative professionals will contribute to a society which values equity, participation and social justice.

Appendix 1

	Retooling	Remodelling	Revitalizing	Re-imagining
Driver/trigger	Accountability and Control by government	Compliance with govt change agenda	Professional renewal	Professional reinvention
Purpose	Upgrading of skills	Modify existing practices	Rethink and renew practices	Transformative practices
Conception of CPD	Transmission	Transmission	Transitional	Transformative
Responsibility	System	School/district	Individual teacher	Teachers
Focus	Professional Development	Professional Development	Professional Learning	Professional Learning

Learning Processes	Passive recipient of knowledge	Uncritical consumer	Collaboration	Mutual engagement and knowledge creation
Approaches	One off seminars, outside expert	Programs devised by an external expert over an extended time	Collaborative learning circles, networks, action research	Practitioner inquiry or action research, inquiry as stance
View of teaching	Teacher as technician	Teacher as craft worker	Teacher as reflective learner	Autonomous professional
Professional Outcomes	Improved teaching skills	Updated discipline knowledge or pedagogical skills	New approaches to pedagogy and learning	Production of new knowledge
Type of professionalism	Controlled	Compliant	Collaborative	Activist
Images of deliverer	Snake oil salesperson	Guru	Skilled peer	Change Agent

CPD Grid

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