What is Professional Learning?

Professional learning has often been seen as something that occurs outside normal work practices, something additional, usually provided by someone from outside your workplace.

In reality, professional learning is something most teachers and educators do everyday, as we reflect on our professional practice, work together and share ideas, and strive to improve student outcomes.

With rapid change all around us, and an evolving role for education and schools, finding time to update our knowledge, skills and professional thinking is vital.

*The kinds of change that really matter in education are not structural changes but those that build teacher capacity and professional culture.*

*Ingvarson (2005)*

Professional learning takes place at several levels:
- the individual
- the workplace
- the organisation

Professional learning at each of these levels is essential in order for DEET to develop as a learning organisation.

A learning organisation can be described as ‘one where training, learning and development are an integral tool to the achievement of core business goals and change is recognised as a normal, ongoing process.’ NTPS (2001)

In a learning organisation, there is a shift away from the traditional training model of professional learning, to a model where learning is interlaced with work and is used to achieve continual improvement. To this end, professional learning must focus on key outcome areas for DEET and for the workplace and on building the capacity of individual employees to achieve these outcomes.

Successful professional learning is that which is:
- embedded in daily practice
- needs based and linked to student/client learning needs
- tailored to meet the specific circumstances or contexts of participants
- sustained over a period of time

DEET is working to establish a self-directed, collaborative and dynamic culture of learning, and to build and develop the capability of staff to engage in such a culture of learning. Within this learning environment, staff take control of their own professional learning, integrating it into their daily work lives; their focus on improving outcomes for students.
Professional development serves as the bridge between where (we) are now and where (we) need to be to meet the new challenges of guiding all students in achieving higher standards of learning and development. ...(It is) the rigorous and relevant content, strategies and organisational supports that ensure the preparation and career-long development of teachers and others whose competence, expectations and actions influence the teaching and learning environment.'

Building Bridges (2000)

Supportive conditions for professional learning

The following diagram shows some of the conditions that can contribute to a supportive school environment that encourages staff to develop as a professional learning community.

For teachers, professional development is a link between their individual skills, knowledge and capacities and the contribution they make to the effective organisation of the school, through their designated role, in order to systematically improve the learning opportunities and outcomes for students.

DEET Victoria (2002)
DuFour (2006) emphasises the importance of time spent building shared knowledge and agreed directions. He describes the four pillars of a professional learning community:

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<tr>
<th>Mission</th>
<th>Vision</th>
<th>Values</th>
<th>Goals</th>
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| • Schools/workplaces need to have a clear, shared understanding of their fundamental purpose – why do we exist? This mission statement leads to a clarity of purpose.  
• Stating what must be done to achieve this purpose – a vision, gives direction.  
• Establishing shared behavioural values contributes to a collective commitment in the workplace.  
• Identifying goals and milestones enables workplaces to set targets and timelines and establish priorities. |

Models of professional learning
Schools can access and adopt a rich variety of professional learning opportunities and models. These opportunities may vary in content and structure - from informal school-based programs and on-line, self-paced programs to structured professional learning activities that may lead to a formal qualification.

Professional learning opportunities can arise through:

**School-based/initiated activities:**
Professional Learning teams within the school plan and develop PL activities in response to school or system priorities. These may be seminars or workshops that are initiated and conducted by and for staff at that school. Schools may also contract a professional learning provider (such as a teacher professional association), engage an outside expert, or invite a guest speaker. Individual professional learning also takes place, often on an individual or mentoring basis. Moderation is an example of a school based PL activity.

**School-based curriculum project programs:**
This category includes activities that involve staff in a project that originates from outside a school but is conducted at the school level. Professional learning communities may form to engage in action learning projects as a result of staff/student involvement in the curriculum project. NTAGQTP projects are an example. (For further information on NTAGQTP go to http://www.deet.nt.gov.au/education/programs_initiatives/agqtp/)

**Visits to other schools**
Professional Learning communities may form across the cluster as schools work together to address a priority area. Teachers can learn by observing colleagues and through opportunities to engage in professional dialogue.

**Programs initiated by an employing authority:**
Typical of this category are professional learning opportunities that are developed and implemented by education systems in response to a priority area. They may include a combination of school-based activities, seminars and workshops. These are often run on a large scale and may lead to a formal qualification such as the ICT courses offered by CDU. The NT Building Better Schools initiative offers PL opportunities to develop teacher knowledge. For further information about NT initiatives please refer to http://www.deet.nt.gov.au/education
**Professional association programs:**
The Australian education community is supported by a large number of professional associations, which are typically curriculum-based. These associations provide a wide range of professional learning activities, including conferences, workshops, seminars and clinics. Associations also provide professional learning, professional learning and resources through active web sites and email lists. The NT Joint Council of Professional Teaching Associations and NT professional associations are autonomous organisations that work collaboratively or independently in meeting subject specific needs and DEET priorities.

**Professional learning resources:**
This category includes resources that have been developed for use by teachers, teacher educators and trainers as the basis of a professional learning program. Such resources may be presented in a variety of forms, including print, CD-ROM and web-based programs, and can often be used in a variety of ways. For example, resources may be designed for individualised, self-paced learning, as the basis of a workshop, or simply as a reference.

Adapted from DETYA (n.d.) Integration of Information Communications Technologies through Teacher Professional Development and Pre Service Training.

In addition to these examples, less formal professional learning can occur in a number of contexts.
A good example [of high-quality professional learning] is a lesson-study program, in which teachers [and support staff] get together to plan instruction, to observe what happens when it's implemented, to analyse what went wrong, to come up with ideas for improving it, and to try doing it again in their classrooms.

Scott Willis (2002)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>How it works</th>
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<tr>
<td>Study groups</td>
<td>Groups come together to discuss a common interest. For example, a group of teachers participating in an online course form a support group to meet face to face.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning partners</td>
<td>Teachers/staff work together – this may include classroom observations and debriefing, team planning, discussing and planning ways to solve problems.</td>
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<td>Mentoring</td>
<td>Mentors are experienced practitioners who share their knowledge with a colleague who has a desire to improve some aspect of their professional knowledge.</td>
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<td>Networks</td>
<td>Networks are established to link groups with a common interest. Networks may be face to face or electronic eg the Oz-TeacherNet email group; EdNA forums where participants join interest discussions.</td>
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<td>Action research</td>
<td>Individually or in teams, teachers/staff pose questions related to their school or classroom. After collecting and analysing information, results are shared with colleagues to develop insights that inform future practice.</td>
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<td>Case studies</td>
<td>Case studies are used to promote professional dialogue and reflection. Observations are recorded and analysed and inform future actions.</td>
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<td>Professional dialogue groups</td>
<td>Dialogue groups are set up as a means to address issues in education. They may involve reading, reflecting and commenting on an article, case study, or student work samples.</td>
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