

# Open forum

## Finding professional development

By Jan Hagston

Jan Hagston has been our wonderful columnist this year. She has shared wisdom and insights developed from reflection on her experience in the field. *Fine Print* would like to thank Jan for transforming thought and research into three fine columns for *Fine Print* readers.

I recently read the consultation paper for the proposed foundation skills professional standards framework (Department of Further Education, Employment, Science and Technology 2013). The section about continuing professional development jumped out at me as I've been thinking about my own professional development. How do I get it? What suits my work life (as a consultant who often works alone or with other time-poor consultants) but isn't superficial?

The consultation paper recognises that most of the professional development of educators is informal and asks how this informal professional development can be captured in a continuing professional development system. The paper asks a number of questions relating to professional development including, 'Could a system for continuing professional development (CPD) be created that will meet the needs of the foundation skills field?' Disregarding the issues of whether there is a foundations skills field and what it is, this question raised a number of further questions for me. What is the aim of professional development? What is it? What is effective professional development? And, how do you get it?

### What is it?

Mayer and Lloyd (2011), in a paper prepared for the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, acknowledge that while the terms professional development and professional learning are often used interchangeably, there are differences between them. It seems that professional development has gone out of favour as it is seen to be something that teachers do or is done to them. Knapp (2003 cited in Mayer and Lloyd 2011) provides a definition of both terms, professional development being 'the full range of activities, formal and informal, that engage teachers or administrators in new learning about their professional practice' while professional learning refers to 'changes in the thinking, knowledge, skills, and approaches to instruction that form practicing teachers' or administrators' repertoire'. Based on these definitions,



I want to engage in both professional development and professional learning.

### When is it effective?

It seems there has been considerable research done on what makes professional development and learning effective (see Mayer and Lloyd 2011 for an overview of some of the research). There seems to be considerable agreement on what makes professional development and learning effective. Factors commonly mentioned are:

- learning that focuses on student learning and examines how to address problems students have with their learning
- learning over time with opportunities to put learning into practice, to receive feedback and review the learning and practice
- access to expertise
- development of own subject/content knowledge
- development of theoretical understanding and using this to make pedagogical decisions
- collaborative learning.

There is also discussion of the importance of the systems and institutions that enable and support professional development/learning.

### **So, how do you do it?**

If the above factors are key in making professional development/learning effective, what are the implications for how professional development/learning should be undertaken? A few things stand out.

One-off activities like conferences, webinars and seminars aren't effective—unless they are part of a broader professional development/learning programme. Of course, they do have other purposes: they are a celebration of good practice, are a vehicle for catching up with people and networking, and sometimes, for gaining inspiration and some headspace to think through challenges.

An effective professional development/learning needs to be undertaken over a period of time so there can be input, reflection, practice, and more reflection with the support of experts and time to discuss and work with colleagues. There need to be activities that address both the subject content and the education theory. And, the activities need to be directly relevant to the students (or, for me, the programmes and resources I develop—which are for students).

### **How do I get it?**

I don't find conferences challenge me or develop my skills or knowledge, except at a superficial level. I'm too busy to do formal study at the moment. I find reading articles and theoretical papers rewarding but only if I can apply them to the work I'm doing or have the opportunity to discuss them with colleagues.

A younger colleague has suggested I join online professional learning networks (PLN). These networks, I'm assured, will connect me to educators worldwide who

can 'offer support, advice, feedback and collaboration opportunities and allow me to collect information from various web sites and access it in one organised area so [I] can stay up to date on the latest teaching techniques, pedagogies and changes in the field of education' (Trust, 2012). It sounds too good to be true but I'm curious and willing to give it a go. I've consulted a few blogs and articles about how they operate and what they offer and I've dipped my toe into the world of online PLNs.

### **But, what of the foundations skills field?**

Are PLNs the answer to foundations skills teachers? Perhaps in part but a system wide continuing professional development model needs to allow teachers and other educators to do more than attend a conference or a one off workshop every now or then. A continuing education model for those teaching foundation skills will need to incorporate the key factors of effective professional learning and development. Anything less is disrespectful to the students and unprofessional.

### **References**

- Department of Further Education, Employment, Science and Technology. (2013). *Foundation skills professional standards framework consultation paper*
- Mayer, D. and Lloyd, M. (2011). *Professional learning: An introduction to the research literature*. Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership. Melbourne.
- Organisation for Economic Cooperation & Development (OECD). (2009). *Creating effective teaching and learning environments: first results from TALIS (Teaching and Learning International Survey)*. OECD. Paris <<http://www.oecd.org/education/school/43023606.pdf>>
- Trust, T. (2012). Professional learning networks designed for teacher learning. *Australian Educational Computing* 27(1), 34–38.