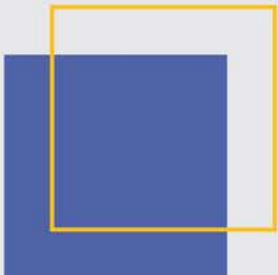# Professional Learning Strategies

March 2020

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING STRATEGIES: SPECIFIC EXAMPLES

Methodologies and Strategies that Work

Proven methods of teacher professional learning (PL) can be broken down into the following five distinct categories:

- Collaborative Teacher Professional Learning
- Continuous Teacher Professional Learning
- Personalized/Contextually-Relevant Teacher Professional Learning
- Experiential Teacher Professional Learning
- Real-time Coaching and Mentoring

Collaborative Teacher Professional Learning (TPL)

Collaborative TPL supports teachers both laterally and hierarchically. A 3-year pilot project conducted in the Winters Joint Unified School District in California reports 3 key outcomes of successful professional learning for teachers: "learning-focused conversations" between staff and faculty which enhance support and sharing of ideas in which teachers benefited from a non-rushed agenda which fostered collaboration and time to process; learning conversations in which teachers take ownership for articulating their own goals and desired outcomes as opposed to directed goals whereby they report a higher sense of success as it translates into the classroom. Finally, teachers benefit greatly from peer and administration feedback based on classroom observations. With this, key outcomes include clear objectives, sound lesson plans, and student engagement (Apilado, 2019).

To further illustrate the power of collaborative, collegial conversations, one Saskatchewan teacher and curriculum consultant, Corey Zeigler, (personal communication, May 22, 2014) recalled:

> *"When another teacher actually shows me their resources, including their assignments, it gives me the opportunity to take their stuff and adapt it to my own context. A few years ago, we were doing Health Science PD, and a teacher showed me her package of x-rays ordered from a science supplier. These x-rays had an assignment that facilitated students learning of how to interpret the x-ray. I didn't end up using the assignment but ordered the x-rays and designed my own assessment. This x-ray assignment changed how I taught a health science outcome in a significant and meaningful way, all because I was able to sit in a room where another science teacher simply shared her approach and resources."*

It cannot be overstated how this type of concrete exchange of materials and ideas can impact a teacher's objectives within the classroom. Teaching need not be a solitary, go-it-alone endeavour as many describe the profession; it can be most satisfying and effective within a dynamic community of peers who work to support one another's learning and practice.

Continuous Teacher Professional Learning

Continuous professional learning stands in stark contrast to traditional one-day seminars. Instead, teacher professional learning is ongoing and is particularly useful for teachers who are able and willing to spend time learning or reviewing material outside classroom hours. Mark Barnes, founder of *Hack Learning*, is a widely published educator of over 20 years. He has rejected the traditional mode of dissemination in favour of various free outlets in which educators choose from and participate. These range from Facebook chat groups, Twitter threads, or online podcasts, to webinars, blogs, and focused books (Berger, 2019). Specific initiatives to support continuous engagement include those like *The Learning Counsel*, founded in 2014 by LeiLani Cauthen, which invites teachers into "live discussions" where educators and districts may engage with others about pertinent topics, such as the transitions occurring from textbooks to digital teaching (Berger). Another strategy that supports continuous professional learning is demonstrated by Michael Gaskell, principal of Hammerskjold Middle School in NJ, who believes in the efficacy of micro-professional learning—mini lessons of about 10 mins, where teachers can "sink their teeth" into a concept in a short amount of time (De La Rosa, 2019). No matter the strategy, continuous professional learning is equally dependent on ease of access and willingness of educators in order for them to benefit from readily available and ready-to-use resources.

Personalized/Contextually-Relevant Teacher Professional Learning

Personalized, or contextually-relevant professional learning has been promoted in recent publications about productive teacher development. It is a response to traditional models in which a school or district relies upon a "…one-size-fits-all factory PD model, ignoring disengaged teachers…" (Powell, 2016, para. 4). Contextually-relevant, personalized learning is a multi-faceted approach. Marquez (2019) reported that online modules that support specific, individual teacher needs, rather than over-generalized instruction to a large group, are preferable. In addition, online modules allow teachers to work through new concepts and implement them at their preferred pace in a live classroom setting (Marquez, 2019).

Similar to the development of pedagogical approaches with students which create unique learning plans for learners, teachers also greatly benefit from personalized learning plans (Marquez, 2019). In Bismarck, North Dakota, teachers collaborated to found the Bismarck Assessment Academy, predicated upon the idea that if students benefit from personalized learning, why not teachers? Thirty-five teachers from seven different schools congregated to design their own learning plans, with the ultimate goal of *implementing* what is learned in a meaningful way. Phillips (2017), reported:

> *"Designing personalized learning experiences for ourselves not only kept us in touch with the needs of our students, but also allowed us the rare opportunity to put ourselves in their shoes as we tested our potential innovations on ourselves. We held ourselves accountable by sharing our individual goals and action steps in their formative stages through engaging in multiple peer feedback protocols and revision loops." ("Practice What We Preach", para. 1).*

Importantly, personalized development is not dismissive of district goals, but instead works them into a teacher's plan in a way that reflects their strengths and builds on their weaknesses, and at a pace comfortable for the teacher. Hindrances to effective personalized professional learning include sufficient allocated time, technological resources, and support for teachers who often feel overloaded with work (Powell, 2016). Once again, a great method for proven professional learning is reliant upon adequate resources and support.

Experiential Teacher Professional Learning (TPL)

Experiential TPL engages teachers in an active and participatory environment. Similar to other methodologies, experiential TPL is student-driven and project-based, or hands-on (Schwartz, 2012, p.11). This type of TPL must blend content with process, inspire buy-in from the learner, generate emotional and relational meaning, prompt self-exploration and reflection, and push a teacher-learner outside his or her perceived comfort zone.

Often, successful experiential TPL equips learners to continue this open-ended learning as a broader trajectory, with sound reasoning skills and a broadened perspective of their topic of subject (Schwartz, p. 9). The process of learning in an experiential context stimulates the teacher as a learner, which in turn concretely supports their in-class pedagogy.

Other forms of experiential TPL rely heavily upon the fiscal support of districts, though opportunities are available that are largely paid for by certain companies which offer hands-on learning, experiences that translate into inspired lesson plans for the classroom. For example, the Saskatchewan Mining Association (SMA) offers GeoVenture, a TPL program that positions accepted teacher applicants in direct contact within diverse mining operations; apart from the $50 application fee, the program is fully sponsored by the SMA (travel, accommodation, and food included). At the end of the program, teachers are provided with free resources to bring back to the classroom.

Experiential TPL is also powerful in creating meaningful connections with Indigenous communities and to foster understanding and reconciliation. In Winnipeg, the Aboriginal Circle of Educators hosts a one-day convention that includes experiential, hands-on learning, stories, and discussion, with the goal of building knowledge and cultural competency for those who work closely with Indigenous children. Participants are encouraged to reflect through journaling and to engage with others in communal exchange and dialogue.

Many opportunities such as these two examples embody the power of experiential learning. These kinds of TPL equip teachers, not only as educators, but as practitioners who are committed to holistic education, in their efforts to inspire young minds, and, at the same time, promote capable and compassionate citizenship development.

Experiential TPL, because of its focus on whole-person education, is worth the investment in education today.

Real-time Coaching and Mentoring

Real-time coaching and mentoring utilizes external professionals who offer on-going active support to a teacher in the classroom. This is particularly impactful for teacher interactions with volatile students; it is also uniquely appropriate to support teachers in rural or inaccessible locales. Teachers are supplied with an app, ear-bud, or blue tooth device that connects them discreetly to a coach, who supports them with suggestions or input during classroom hours (De La Rosa, 2019).

Similarly, many teachers desire the tools to update their technological skill set in the classroom. According to a 2018 PwC Survey, only 1/10 of teachers feel equipped to prepare their students for a technologically savvy workforce that, by 2020, will work in 77% of jobs utilizing some form of technology (as cited in Marquez, 2019, para. 2). The Learning Policy Institute reports that teachers strongly benefit from learning initiatives that span several days of coaching and instruction on technology, rather than the typical single-day professional development day approaches (as cited in Marquez, 2019). The Dynamic Learning Project, an initiative supported by Google, provided technology coaching to teachers across five states in 2017–2018. Personalized coaching through the Dynamic Learning Project has enhanced teacher confidence and aptitude substantially. Upon completion of the project, "approximately 90 percent said the type of support they received could help improve student learning, and nearly 92 percent believed coaching-related professional development could have a positive effect on student engagement" (Marquez, 2019, "Instructional Coaches Help Teachers," para. 7). This type of professional learning is far-reaching in scope not only for teachers who need continuous support in their own technological capabilities, but for students who will soon be an emerging workforce in need of these critical skills.

POSITIVE APPROACHES IN TEACHER PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Current educational literature suggests a few key approaches that have positive possibilities and important implications for teacher professional learning. These include the following:

- The whole-child approach which addresses emotional and social support to build confident, compassionate learners.
- The inclusive approaches which help to create accepting and engaging spaces for a diverse body of learners.
- The game-based learning and teaching approach which taps into a new effective strategy.

Whole-Child Approach

It must not be overstated that children's well-being is paramount in the quest for equitable and successful education. That said, teacher well-being—their emotional and social sense of health—must also be addressed as key to good educational practices. Thus, both the desire to teach to the "whole child" is interconnected with professional learning that supports teachers' own health and their understanding of children's emotional and social support.

Teachers are an important part of the social paradigm of a child's sense of stability; educators knowledgeable about social and emotional learning (SEL) and character development will affect intrinsically how receptive students are to learning.

Founded in 2009, the Center for Reaching and Teaching the Whole Child (CRTWC) at San Jose State University acknowledges "the belief that education ought to address the whole student and that development is shaped not just by schools but by one's socio-political, cultural, community, and individual context" (Melnick & Martinez, 2019, p. 7). From a study conducted at Lakewood Elementary School, which aimed to implement SEL into all facets of the school environment and curriculum, six strategies to enhance SEL are identified:

1. Students are given opportunities for self-directed play which involves decision-making and self-management skills.

2. There is conscious identification of emotional state during different activities, particularly those that may incite frustration or self-doubt.
3. Teachers model their own emotions; they "think aloud" and process their emotional journey in specific contexts.
4. Teachers strategically plan academic activities with emotional and social competencies in mind.
5. Group work enhances collaboration skills.
6. Mediation of conflict in order to assist students in learning and understanding how to resolve issues constructively constitutes an essential component. (Melnick & Martinez, 2019)

In order for SEL to be successfully implemented, however, several key outcomes *regarding teacher perspectives* must be realized:

- The teachers and administration must undergo their own social and emotional learning, in order that they better understand their students.
- "Buy-in" is intrinsic to the success of SEL: administration and teachers must take ownership and resolve to participate actively in their own SEL development and to participate in the implementation of SEL as integral to school culture and pedagogical practices.
- There is a need for professional learning that is "explicit, sustained, and job-imbedded" (Melnick & Martinez, p. vii)—in other words, not just a one-time occurrence, but rather on-going support and development.
- Assessment and measurement of a teacher's SEL competencies is also important to provide them with the time and skills to address feedback. (Melnick & Martinez, 2019)

Many reasons exist to justify—and perhaps require—the implementation of locally developed strategies with SEL and other components in schools, not the least of which is to provide teachers with increased sensitivity to and understanding of the difficult backgrounds of students in our schools today as well as the effects of current or historical personal trauma that particular groups experience. The plights of Indigenous students will receive special attention in this report. But we caution that those most affected must play a key role in the determining the strategies that are selected, implemented, and evaluated for effectiveness. As Hannah Hollins, a District of Columbia high school teacher, ascertained:

> *"Trauma-informed pedagogy should be a professional development priority for schools that serve students who have and continue to experience high levels of stress outside (and inside) their school building. It's about creating an environment that acknowledges students' traumas…and providing support or interventions when necessary." (Will, 2019)*

Not only is the whole-child approach important to serving the child, but it is necessary in creating and nurturing connections between educators and learners. It is a likely reality too that many teachers would benefit from a personal journey toward understanding their own anger issues, mental illness, or past traumas if they exist.

Inclusive Approaches: Diversity as Strength

In the past, and even in recent history, the question of how to handle diversity has elicited strategies which separated those who do not fall within parameters of standardized "norms". Children with disabilities, for instance, were sequestered in their own wing of a school, or were placed in an entirely separate school. Teachers were tasked with teaching to a narrow spectrum of average-abled students. Any attempt to assimilate students with disabilities was met with exasperation and doubt over how best to manage the difference. Perspectives are shifting steadily. Manitoba has many examples of innovative practices in inclusion. Nonetheless, there is still a lot of room to build upon current successes, redouble our efforts and support for teachers, and redefine the province's approach to diversity on a larger scale. Many newcomers, immigrants, and refugees spoke to us passionately and convincingly about the social, emotional, and academic needs of their children in Manitoba classrooms

Moore (2018), both educator and advocate for inclusion of students with disabilities, addresses the history of segregation and exclusion of persons with disabilities, moving forward to support integration and inclusion. She maintains that inclusion cannot just be a matter of sharing physical space, but must include efforts to generate *meaningful connections* between peers with disabilities and without. In addition, Moore (2019) identified problems imbedded in current teaching methods where teachers employ a traditional curricular model (teaching to the majority), and then *after the fact* apply a retrofit style of instruction for outliers, students with disabilities which—increased teacher workloads. Since, as Moore (2019) contends, classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse, it is flawed thinking to imagine there is even a majority. Instead, she argued, educators should be "teaching to diversity," and "teaching to the difference". It is not a stretch, then, to expect teacher professional learning to address and grapple with *how* this radically different approach can be realized in the classroom.

Not only is it necessary for professional learning to address issues of diversity from a curricular point of view, but educators *must* be equipped with skills and strategies towards understanding and supporting diverse student needs from an overarching human rights standpoint. Changes made to the Canadian *Human Rights Act* in 2017 acknowledged and protected those who identify along a non-homogenous identity spectrum (Department of Justice, 2017). Professional learning programs are specially designed to educate teachers and train them to create safe, supportive school environments for those who identify as sexual or gender minorities. SOGI (Safe is Not Enough: Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity), a two-day program offered to educators at the University of British Columbia (n.d.), is a response to the increased need for teacher knowledge, understanding, resources, and skills. The program will "[develop and present] inclusive pedagogical approaches that recognize, and intervene to transform, the impacts of systemic discrimination towards sexual and gender minorities" (University of British Colombia, para. 2). For a healthy school environment to exist, it is necessary that teachers undergo professional learning that fortifies their competencies in responding to discrimination, prejudice, and ignorance with respect to diversity and its implications.

Finally, it is important once again, to stress the fact that the implementation of Indigenous perspectives, cultures, and history is necessary for the purpose of reconciliation and to deepen a commitment to inclusive Canadian communities and schools. Various resources are available for teachers, for example, the University of Toronto's (2019) project "Deepening Knowledge: Resources for and about Aboriginal Education" is available on their website. These and other available resources can help teachers engage in continuous learning over the course of their careers which in turn, will contribute to the development of inclusive environments in schools and classrooms.

Game-Based Learning and Teaching Approach

In connection with professional learning that supports teachers' technological capabilities, many teachers are interested, but tentative, in using game-based strategies in the classroom. Advocates of game-based play for students contend that games engage participants and draw them into an active, contextually-relevant learning experience. Hesitancy to adopt game-based learning may be due to how teachers are trained, a lack of resources, or stigmas revolving around game-play as counter to learning, with inadequate professional development of pre- and in-service teachers to learn this new approach (Denham, Mayben, & Boman, 2016). Professional learning that enhances teachers' capacity to use game-based learning (GBL) fulfills several of the key strategies discussed earlier: GBL is collaborative, continuous, and experiential, and can be personalized for a teacher's area of expertise (Denham et al., 2016, p. 71). Learning that utilizes this approach fulfills a desire for specificity, but also for peer interaction and dialogue. Constructivist games-based learning—where the learner is involved in decisions made babout the game and its outcomes—engages the learner, whether teacher or student, and assures outcomes, including enhanced problem-solving skills and collaboration (Denham et al., p. 73).

For both teachers and learners, access to GBL is reliant upon training, resources, and support. University of Calgary Professor Katrin Becker, who specializes in training educators on GBL, recognizes obstacles to the integration of GBL. Becker (2007) compared the hesitance and caution many teachers show towards games and technology in the classroom to earlier eras when television or even books were introduced. There is a vast spectrum of what is appropriate and inappropriate in the classroom of *any* medium (p. 481). Through her offered courses, she educates teachers on how to be aware of and feel comfortable ascertaining games' "potential as well as their limitations" (p. 482). No longer are games merely an avenue of reward or diversion, but instead—appropriately selected—they can be powerful simulations of learning experiences. As Becker stated , "Playing games must be seen as part of games literacy in the same way that reading books is essential to traditional literacy" (p. 483). Consequently, GBL should be considered a key component of teacher professional learning. Its uses are vastly applicable in classroom settings and course structures. It will certainly engage learners who are already adapted to the use of games as recreation. It is a natural strategy to connect learners, offering them valuable skills and knowledge, as well as opportunities for social interaction in a milieu in which they are most comfortable.

REFERENCES

Apilado, Crystal. "Professional growth pilot concludes winters teachers should have more time for collaboration." *Winters Express*. May 15, 2019, https://www.wintersexpress.com/local-news/professional-growth-pilot-concludes-winters-teachers-should-be-given-more-time-for-collaboration/.

Becker, Katrin. "Digital game-based learning once removed: Teaching teachers." *British Journal of Educational Technology, 38*(3), April 25, 207, pp.478–488.

Berger, Rod. "Hacking education change for the professional development market." *Forbes.* May 16, 2019, https://www.forbes.com/sites/rodberger/2019/05/16/hacking-education-change-for-the-professional-development-market/#751473271cc2.

De La Rosa, Shawna. "Forget 'sit-and-get' 3 approaches are transforming professional development." *Education Drive*. May 15, 2019, https://www.educationdive.com/news/forget-sit-and-get-3-approaches-are-transforming-professional-developmen/553418/.

Denham, André R., Robert Mayben, & Terri Boman "Integrating game-based learning initiative: Increasing the usage of game-based learning within K-12 classrooms through professional learning groups." *TechTrends: Linking Research & Practice to Improve Learning, 60*(1), January 2016, pp. 70–76.

Department of Justice. *Bill C-16: An Act to Amend the Canadian Human Rights Act and the Criminal Code.* 2017, https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/csj-sjc/pl/identity-identite/statement-enonce.html.

Marquez, Joe. "K–12 professional development is critical, so make it count." *EdTech Magazine.* May 13, 2019, https://edtechmagazine.com/k12/article/2019/05/k-12-professional-development-critical-so-make-it-count.

Melnick, Hanna. & Lorea Martinez. *Preparing teachers to support social and emotional learning: A case study of San Jose State University and Lakewood Elementary School*. Palo Alto, CA: *Learning Policy Institute*. May 14, 2019, https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/SEL_CaseStudies_SJSU_Lakewood_REPORT.pdf.

Moore, Shelley. *The evolution of inclusion: The past and future of education*. 2018, https://openlearning.mit.edu/beyond-campus/transforming-k-12-education.

Moore, Shelley. "Five Moore Minutes". *Inclusion 2.0: Teaching to diversity* [Video file]. January 7, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rO3_UYaz1HE.

Pharis, Thomas J., Echo Wu, Stephanie Sullivan, & LaSonya Moore. "Improving teacher quality: Professional development implications from teacher professional growth and effectiveness system implementation in rural Kentucky high schools." *Educational Research Quarterly, 42*(3), March 2019, pp. 29–48.

Phillips, Pat. "Personalizing professional development for teachers, by teachers." *EdSurge*. January 4, 2017, https://www.edsurge.com/news/2017-01-04-personalizing-professional-development-for-teachers-by-teachers.

Powell, Marcia. "Navigating toward personalized professional development." *Education Week Teacher*. February 1, 2016, https://www.edweek.org/tm/articles/2016/02/01/navigating-towards-personalized-professional-development.html.

PwC. "Technology in US schools: Are we preparing our kids for the jobs of tomorrow?" 2018, https://www.pwc.com/us/en/about-us/corporate-responsibility/library/preparing-students-for-technology-jobs.html.

Schwartz, Michelle. Best practices in experiential learning report. Toronto, ON: Ryerson University Learning and Teaching Office. 2012, https://www.mcgill.ca/eln/files/eln/doc_ryerson_bestpracticesryerson.pdf.

Schwartz, Michelle. Experiential learning report. Toronto, ON: Ryerson University Learning and Teaching Office. 2012, https://www.scribd.com/document/396981596/Experiential-Learning-Report.

University of British Columbia. "SOGI - Safe is Not Enough: Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Education and Leadership." Faculty of Education: Professional Development & Community Engagement. https://pdce.educ.ubc.ca/sogi-vancouver/.

University of Toronto. *Deepening knowledge: Resources for and about Aboriginal Education*. 2019, https://www.oise.utoronto.ca/deepeningknowledge/.

Will, Madeline. "What are the blind spots in teacher PD?" *Education Week*. May 14, 2019, https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2019/05/15/what-are-the-blind-spots-in-teacher.html.