

The new theory of evolution

Creating continuing professional development that is meaningful and memorable is possible after all

DAVID WESTON

Worrying facts

- In a snapshot of training providers for the Training and Development Agency for Schools, Curee found that only 1 per cent of the courses were effective at transforming poor teaching into better practice.
- Only 7 per cent of schools report evaluating the impact of CPD on their pupils' learning.
- Despite its importance in raising standards, schools spend, on average, just 0.5 per cent of their budgets on CPD.
- Teachers report that the most common form of training they receive is watching a PowerPoint.
- CPD providers report that the only courses guaranteed to sell out are those on Ofsted, new government regulations and new exam syllabuses, not those on better teaching and learning.

CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL development (CPD) is one of the most powerful school improvement tools that exists. In schools where the CPD is run really well, teachers feel more confident, more enthusiastic and more able to make a difference to their pupils' learning.

It is an eye-catching list of benefits, and comes from a large body of research that additionally explains – perhaps even more impressively – that pupils of these same teachers benefit from greater motivation and enthusiasm for subjects, improved performance in tests and greater fluency and sophistication in their answers.

Depressingly, despite these wonderful benefits, the evidence suggests that the vast majority of CPD going on in many schools has no benefit to anybody involved.

Indeed, while it often feels inspiring to be out on a training day, or to discuss your work in school on Inset days without the children, little of what is done during those days makes us better teachers. The reason? Far too much training is one-off, consisting of superficial tips and tricks, and fails to relate to the needs of the pupils.

Nobody learns effectively this way – which is something we well know when we teach our own pupils and yet fail to take on board when it comes to teaching each other.

Philippa Cordingley from the Centre for the Use of Research Evidence in Education (Curee) is one of the lead researchers in this area and explains that “What’s sauce for the goose, in this case the pupils, is sauce for the gander – the teachers”; if we practised in CPD what we preach in the classroom then the whole profession could benefit.

My charity, the Teacher Development Trust, is actively campaigning for schools to adopt radically more effective approaches to the way teachers develop and learn. This approach is based on a wealth of international evidence that highlights four key principles underpinning some of the outstanding practice in our best schools, as well as school systems in high-performing countries such as Japan and Finland.

Principle 1: Focus on pupil need

The first required shift in thinking is that teachers' CPD should be targeted squarely at the learning needs of their pupils. By carefully identifying specific pupils or cohorts, the whole process of learning becomes less abstract. The best schools are constantly on the lookout for pupils who need further support, whether for remedial work or to challenge them further.

The trouble is that the assessment data used in schools are often far too broad to be of any use. Simply knowing that James is performing below his target in maths tells you nothing about the specific areas where he is struggling. A generic intervention may be wasted when what he really needs is some detailed work on geometry and angles.

The more specific the identified need, the better the professional development. Because his teacher, Angela, knows that James and four of his low-prior-attainment peers seem to be having particular difficulty with geometry she can now book herself on to a course that gives her more teaching strategies in geometry with these pupils. During the course itself, Angela will now be considering James' reaction to every new idea presented, and she can ask specific questions of the facilitator to help address her pupil's needs.

If the facilitator, Steve, is being particularly effective, he will be asking challenging questions of Angela to make her question her own beliefs. Perhaps she has arrived with a preconception that pupils like James will never grasp these ideas fully and that differentiation in these cases means not presenting harder material.

Steve should test these particular theories of learning, as the evidence shows that until Angela's underlying beliefs are engaged then she is unlikely to change the way she teaches significantly.

At the end of this particular course, Angela may well give Steve a low rating as she did not like having her ideas questioned, but in this case that is the mark of effective learning – it is not

THOMAS BOSWELL

Sound advice

"This sounds great to me, but my school doesn't get CPD. What should I do?"

- Find one or two like-minded colleagues and start your own CPD group. Begin by identifying specific pupils and learning issues.
- Identify expertise on the web, in books and in other schools. Twitter is a great way to share and discuss ideas with other teachers.
- Set yourselves a long time frame – meet regularly for at least two terms. A rota for bringing cakes and biscuits can do wonders.
- Observe each other and video yourself. Do not worry about what you are doing at the front; concentrate on the way pupils react to the lesson. Use examples of work to compare and discuss what is happening. Talk to pupils to explore the ideas.
- Talk to sympathetic members of the senior leadership team and ask them to attend some of your sessions to see the benefits.

always enjoyable. Indeed, after a restless night of thinking, Angela goes back to school with much higher aspirations for James and his peers – another mark of really effective professional development.

Principle 2: Joint practice development

The traditional British teacher is a solitary employee who gets quite uncomfortable when someone starts looking over their shoulder at their marking or lesson planning. Conversations in the staffroom tend to be about family or office politics with the occasional foray in to "Has anyone got a copy of textbook X?" or "How far through the scheme of work are you? I'm worried I'm falling behind." Once in the classroom with the pupils, it is on with the lesson that has been planned alone, will be carried out alone and will be evaluated, you guessed it, entirely alone.

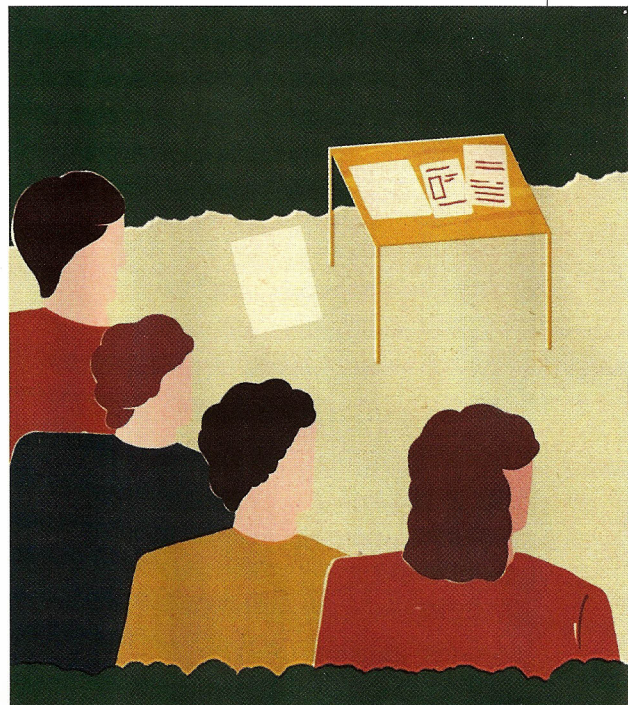
Of course, someone in senior management will probably pop in for an observation once in a blue moon, and they will be poring over your test scores in a spreadsheet somewhere, but it is all very much at arm's length.

This whole approach to teaching contrasts hugely with the teamwork displayed in Japanese and Finnish schools, where the quality of teaching of a subject is considered to be the joint responsibility of every teacher in that department. A bad lesson in one classroom is a problem for everyone, so a huge amount of time is spent working in teams to plan lessons, share learning issues and misconceptions, and to evaluate the work of many different pupils to build a mutual understanding of the learning taking place.

The joint development of teaching practice is of fundamental importance in improving teachers' professional development. "Sharing good practice" is not enough by itself – it can lead to superficial understanding of ideas without engaging with the theory behind them.

When such teamwork works well, it inevitably leads to more disagreements in the staffroom, albeit productive ones. In fact, in such staffrooms, trust and mutual respect run very deep. Teachers coach and observe one another, and precious time together is not wasted on procedural matters but used to discuss ways to create more effective learning.

To illustrate, Angela, from our previous example, returns from her course and starts planning the next group of lessons with her colleague from the adjacent set. They end up having a heated debate about the merits of the new ideas, which leads Angela to send facilitator Steve an email to clarify some points. Her colleague agrees to come and watch Angela's next lesson to see what effect the ideas are having on James, and they use his observations, as well as some joint discussion of that lesson's work in his exercise book, to refine their theories before presenting them to the rest of the department.



Principle 3: Sustain the learning

Angela's growing enthusiasm for the new approaches will not come to much unless she keeps on refining and adapting the ideas for several months. Sadly, this is the prime reason that most good ideas from CPD fail to have any impact – people simply lose momentum, forget the ideas and revert to their previous practice.

Research suggests that unless teachers actively engage with a new idea for at least 50 hours over two or more terms then the difference it makes to their pupils will be minimal. It is likely that a more successful approach in one area will simply highlight weaknesses in another area of learning. If teachers are attending one-off courses as part of this extended cycle of enquiry then such off-site CPD can play an immensely valuable role. However, in most schools these courses are isolated and disconnected occurrences and all benefit is lost in a sea of other priorities and classroom stresses.

Angela's work with her colleague has really only just begun. Fortunately, she and her colleague find time regularly to plan their next lessons and they are able to observe each other, as well as other colleagues, so that the whole team develops the ideas that Angela learned on her original course.

As time goes on, it is apparent that the root causes of James' issues with geometry are quite specific – different, in fact, from some of the other pupils in the cohort they are studying. James never really understood angles the first time they were taught, and Angela tries pairing him up with a more confident pupil to work through some fundamental ideas. This is only partially successful and Angela ends up partnering with a different colleague to develop their



approaches to partner work, which sparks a whole new interest in this style of teaching.

Two terms later, after repeated research, reflection and enquiry, the department has a much more solid approach to geometry that permeates every scheme of work in every year, and they are starting to head off in different directions as they feel their work is done.

Principle 4: Engage with experts

Many schools have created CPD groups that work this way, with a process of enquiry that leads them to new ideas. People usually feel quite inspired by the process. In our example, the department proudly invites course facilitator Steve in to observe their new approach. However, they are stunned when he is not as enthusiastic as they are. Steve explains that, although they have come a long way, they have not yet explored the new ideas to their full potential, and in some areas they have developed suboptimal strategies.

This is a classic example of group-think in action. No matter how well intentioned, any group of people will start thinking along similar lines and end up agreeing even when the evidence is weak. The final fundamental principle of effective CPD is that it requires external expert input in order to disrupt such group-think and guide teams towards the most effective strategies.

Teachers need to engage with experts and coaches at regular intervals to ensure that their own lines of enquiry are not leading them down blind alleys. While refining and experimenting with practice is vital to improving teaching, pupils cannot afford to wait while teachers discover that their new approaches are ineffective. Similarly, improvement is urgent enough

that it should not be allowed to stop when a teacher is overwhelmed with personal or work issues – there needs to be a mentor or coach on hand to support and guide teachers through such times and ensure they remain passionate and engaged.

Angela's team spend a while discussing their progress with Steve and he suggests three or four possible ways in which they can fruitfully develop their thinking.

They spend a couple of hours planning some lessons with him and agree to bring him back in to their department at the end of the academic year. Angela promises to remain in touch by email to make sure they do not repeat their mistakes in the meantime.

Bringing it together

This model of professional development is a massive shift from the typical approach taken in many schools, and there are significant logistical challenges in making it possible. Timetables may not be set up to allow for peer observation and joint planning sessions, and there may be some who reject such new ideas as unwarranted intrusion and undermining of professionalism. Of course, quite the opposite is true, but there are, sadly, no shortcuts to building the necessary trust and respect to make such things possible.

Some schools are too timid – the evidence suggests that despite initial friction there can be just as much success when people are conscripted into such processes as when they are given the chance to volunteer. However, unless senior leaders are willing and able to model the open, trusting and reflective approach in their own practice, it is unlikely that change will be successful.

Here at the Teacher Development Trust we are publishing resources and case studies to support schools in their journey towards effective practice in this area, supported by our national database of courses, consultancy services, books, videos and qualifications from a huge range of providers. The database includes teacher reviews and official quality ratings, and we would encourage schools to make rating their courses a key part of their course evaluation so that other schools can more effectively find the very best training provision and steer clear of the worst.

The Teacher Development Trust is holding a series of free webinar debates about effective CPD. Visit www.teacherdevelopmenttrust.org and <http://GoodCPDGuide.com> for more details. David Weston set up the Teacher Development Trust after nine years of teaching maths and physics in secondary schools in the South East. He has written teaching materials, delivered and consulted on CPD, and been involved in initial teacher training. To find more about Cúree, go to www.curee.co.uk

WHAT TO AVOID

- Never assume that improving lessons is just a matter of “bolting on” tricks. Without a deep understanding of the theory, simply mandating teachers to, for example, write up lesson objectives or “use assessment for learning” will be entirely counterproductive.
- The planning stages of a lesson are where teachers really engage with content, misconceptions and ideas to develop their thinking. Pre-prepared, bought-in lessons plans are a sticking-plaster approach that will do nothing to improve teaching in the long term and will end up demotivating and de-skilling teachers.
- Avoid making your CPD reactive. Far too many schools prioritise their CPD budget to help them cope with Ofsted, new exam syllabuses and new regulations. A greater focus on sustained, collaborative CPD that proactively improves teaching and learning is far more beneficial in the long term.
- Make lesson observations focus on pupil learning and not on whether a teacher is talking the talk. The worst sort of observation is a tick-box approach that forces compliance with a mandatory list of practices, while the best results in meaningful discussions about the way pupils learn.