

Kathleen Smith

Teachers as Self-directed Learners

Active Positioning through Professional
Learning

Self-Study of Teaching and Teacher Education Practices

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Foreword

There has been considerable writing about the nature of teachers' professional development over the years. Even a cursory glance of the literature illustrates that despite the best efforts of many, a prevailing view of teacher development hinges on notions of working *on* teachers as opposed to working *with* teachers. The difference between these two views is stark. An important, and far too often overlooked, aspect of the difference revolves around teachers' knowledge and how it is recognised, valued and developed.

In the working *on* teachers approach to professional development, teachers tend to be positioned as members of a workforce that need 'upskilling', usually as a consequence of a change in policy and curriculum or in response to a new teaching activity/idea that has recently come to prominence. Under these circumstances, teachers are not necessarily seen as creators of knowledge. Rather, they are viewed as consumers and implementers of others' knowledge. Yet, on a daily basis, through the very interactions that define quality in learning and teaching, teachers are building their professional knowledge of practice – albeit idiosyncratic, tacit and highly contextualised. Recognising and valuing that knowledge is what matters for developing the teaching as a profession and so doing offers a window into understanding the complex and sophisticated work of teaching and the expertise that results from learning about it in meaningful ways.

In this book, Kathy Smith breaks new ground around these issues as she makes clear how working with teachers through professional learning impacts their practice and their understanding of student learning in new and powerful ways. The project at the heart of this text draws serious attention to the nature of professional learning and makes clear how valuing teachers as producers, not just users, of knowledge matters – it shapes their deeds and actions as professionals. There is little doubt, as her data makes clear, that for many teachers, being valued in this way is a new experience, an experience that changes how they come to see themselves, what they do and the way they go about doing it.

This book offers insights into the ways in which creating conditions for learning matter in shaping the way teachers come to see, and accept, the possibilities for their own growth and development. The professional learning approach Smith developed

through this project and the way in which she has researched it and now shares with the education community, in new ways. In so doing, she creates an invitation for education systems to think differently about how they work with their teachers – she offers evidence of real change through professional learning. More than that though, she also illustrates the importance of placing the teacher at the centre of their own pedagogical thinking and reasoning. In recognising and responding to that type of positioning, their issues, needs and concerns are not only met, but their practice is also challenged and further developed in ways that matter for their sense of efficacy and ultimately, their students' learning.

What it is that teachers know and are able to do has been a point of discussion for some time. However, much of that discussion has hinged on the work of those observing teaching, not necessarily those involved in it. Through this book, Smith offers an opportunity to see into what teachers know and are able to do from their perspective as a consequence of their ownership of their professional learning. As her research makes clear, that is not necessarily an easy task, but it is an important task. It is a task that is driven by a respect for, and a serious valuing of, teachers' professional knowledge of practice.

In reading this book, it becomes immediately obvious that sharpening the focus on professional learning leads to outcomes that cannot be mandated and certainly should not be seen as a model for precise duplication. As her research consistently demonstrates, there is a crucial element of professional learning that is deeply personal, so supporting teacher growth requires a form of planning and leadership that is inherently tied to context and to teachers' personal pedagogical needs and concerns. As she makes clear, creating a professional learning model that will solve the many and varied issues in teaching and learning is not the intention. However, it is a message that education systems need to come to grips with if teacher development is to genuinely respond to the needs of the profession.

Through this book, Smith shows us that the very nature of learning and teaching, and how teachers grapple with that on a daily basis, is a gateway to valuable professional learning. By developing principles of practice, by creating opportunities for pedagogical growth through the notion of conditions for learning, she illustrates how to better value teachers and teaching, their knowledge and the way that is developed, refined and enacted over time – these essence of learning.

I find this book to be a compelling and powerful account of research into professional learning that makes a difference. Research like this matters because it offers an opportunity to impact what teachers do and how. It goes well beyond superficial views of teaching as training or the simplistic pursuit of technical competence alone. I appreciated enormously the thoughtfulness, rigour and evidence displayed throughout the text in building a case for professional learning as a catalyst for educational change. I trust you arrive at a similar conclusion through your reading.

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John Loughran

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About the Book

Research, at its best, exposes the complex weave of events and intricacies that are the fabric of routine. The familiar becomes extraordinary and from that moment on there is no going back; this clarity demands attention. Teachers, the professionals who weave the fabric of educational routine, those who are most familiar with the intricacies of this work, have an expertise and professional knowledge that provides a clarity about what matters in education. This is a story of research about teachers who share what they think matters and how they determine what they need to learn to become the teachers they want to be. After hearing this story, there is no going back; there is only one way forward.

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Part I

Teacher Professional Development: Who Owns the Learning?

Reconsidering the Assumptions that Frame Teacher Learning

The first section of this book considers the thinking and action that has traditionally framed approaches to teacher professional development and suggests that generally accepted practices have had limited impact in terms of teacher learning or educational improvement. This creates opportunity to explore alternative conditions for teacher learning, in particular conditions that seek to position teachers as active learners working as key decision makers about what matters for their own professional growth. Underpinning such a position is a recognition of the professional expertise of teachers and a willingness to reconsider the ownership of expert knowledge, in particular teachers' professional knowledge of practice and the value and place of this expertise in teacher education. This begins to highlight a key difference between programmes which seek to provide teacher professional development and teacher professional learning, and these differences must be clearly articulated to ensure that teachers are supported to work in conditions which value and explicitly attend to their professional status and expertise. Finally, these ideas are developed in practical ways to produce an in-service programme that is designed to work with teachers to develop deep understandings of the conditions that enable teachers to work as self-directed learners. The systematic organisation of this study is outlined together with some key findings which become the focus of the following sections of this book.

Chapter 1

Teachers as Learners: Building an Alternative Landscape

Abstract In the first chapter, teaching is defined as that which involves a complex understanding and enactment of the interrelatedness between pedagogy, context and astute decision making. This thinking is positioned within the personal experience of the author who has worked as both a teacher and a professional learning facilitator. This chapter begins to define the local context which gave rise to and determined a need for research to rethink the role of the teacher in the professional learning experience. It flags that the changes that emerged ultimately required all involved in the process of learning to think and work differently.

Introduction

For many years as a professional learning facilitator, my ‘everyday’ involved working within a range of contexts and situations watching and listening to teachers as they talked about and developed their practice. In this role, I had the privilege to witness the high degree of expertise that teachers exercise as they seamlessly attend to a wide range of complex decisions every day in their teaching. I heard teachers describe their efforts to create rich learning environments, and I learnt a great deal from their thinking as they described how they attended to their students in order to build relationships which nurtured and supported meaningful learning. Such experience has assured me that expert teachers know what they want to achieve for their students and that such a clear sense of educational purpose can and does make a difference to student learning. Yet more than anything, these experiences have continued to deepen my conviction in the belief that teaching is complex and difficult work. It is interrelated with and answerable to a range of diverse stakeholders, many of whom are external to the everyday work of schools yet all hold vested interests and high expectations of teachers.

The Role of Teachers in Changing Times

It is impossible to understand teaching without acknowledging the complex and demanding top-down models which frame regulatory educational practice. Governments, political parties, education systems and the educational sectors within such systems have all framed education in ways which define philosophical positions and political aspirations. This is clearly evident in the prevailing global agendas of national security and strong fiscal growth which, as global drivers of education policy, have charged schools with the immense responsibility of ensuring an innovative and adaptable workforce capable of delivering economic prosperity and social stability. In this way, bureaucratic perspectives actively work to define that which is 'valued' learning and, backed by productivity indicators, these educational emphases seek to direct teaching – performance against compliance.

Within the often conflicting agendas of government policies, assessment regimes and reactive, short-lived educational initiatives, teachers continue to negotiate the task of nurturing meaningful learning for every student. This ever-changing and continually demanding context partly accounts for the problematic nature of their work – providing continuity and routine within an uncertain and changing educational landscape. Yet they continue their work, attempting to ensure students experience opportunity for sustained growth and development. Teachers navigate this landscape to shape school-based learning, and in doing so ensure the needs and expectations of competing stakeholders are expertly woven into the fabric of their professional practice.

While global contexts and situations differ, every education system relies upon teachers to execute and deliver quality teaching to enable quality learning. While political imperatives frequently shift, expert teachers keep an eye on what matters; they are the gatekeepers who determine meaningful learning, teaching and success. Yet within the general discourse of education, the teacher's voice is rarely heard, such expertise seems forgotten or at worst deliberately ignored.

Noticing Teacher Expertise

Teaching is difficult work because it requires a complex understanding of the inter-relatedness between pedagogy and context, enacted through astute decision making. Everyday, as teachers make decisions that determine appropriate actions and responses in a range of circumstances, they appear to draw on an almost intuitive knowledge of practice that is shaped by their professional experience. Yet teachers seldom describe how they use this 'know how' to inform their practice. They are rarely required to explicitly articulate what it is they pay attention to in their teaching, and while there is a clear relationship between effective teaching and quality learning, their 'silence' seems to feed a general ignorance about the nature and value of teacher professional knowledge. Their actions and their profession

constantly attract public attention, as the old adage goes, everyone has been to school so everyone has an opinion about how to teach. Often, public perceptions define teaching as simply about doing great activities or delivering accurate information, and this fails to value the very specific and complex professional knowledge that underpins teaching. Sadly, even perceptions among the broader educational community often fail to recognise the intricacies of teachers' practice and the expert knowledge teachers could potentially contribute to educational discourse. As a consequence, many teachers fail to value their own expertise causing them to talk about their work in overtly understated and self-effacing ways. Many teachers feel disenfranchised from the very work they do, feeling disempowered and victimised by the systems in which they work.

Without doubt teacher professional knowledge of practice clearly embodies a proficiency that is crucial to supporting quality learning. Encouraging teachers to articulate their professional knowledge and share the reasoning that informs their practice, is critical to enhancing not only student learning but the status of teachers and the teaching profession. Knowing more about what matters to teachers is crucial.

Over time, I have become increasingly intrigued to know more about the conditions that enable teachers to share the thinking that informs their practice. I have more recently started to wonder if in-service professional learning opportunities could be designed in ways that develop teacher confidence in their expertise and also enable them to articulate what they value and what they want to learn more about to enhance their practice. However, my experience as a professional learning facilitator also alerts me to the difficulties of attempting to explicate teachers' professional knowledge, not least because it appears to be tacit and deeply embedded within the everyday busyness of teaching (Loughran 2010).

Professional Learning That Actively Positions Teachers as Self-Directed Learners

Against this backdrop of thinking about teacher expertise and the need for teachers to articulate the knowledge that drives their teaching, I began to consider if it was possible for in-service teacher education programmes to actively acknowledge teacher expertise and do so by creating learning conditions that required and supported teachers to actively share their professional knowledge. This shift in thinking would inevitably necessitate a shift in the accepted and prevailing practices which frame in-service teacher education. To nurture such learning would require conditions which explicitly positioned teachers as active learners experiencing a process of personal learning rather than simply attending a mandated programme. To achieve this end, it seemed reasonable to assume that teachers would need to be positioned as key decision makers about what mattered for their own professional

learning, and in doing so this would require programme facilitators to find ways of working *with* teachers rather than *on* teachers.

From my experience, working as a facilitator of in-service teacher education programmes, it seemed that prevailing approaches to teacher in-service education did not actively create such conditions for learning. Anecdotally, the content of many in-service programmes was predetermined and not intentionally designed to address teacher's individual learning needs. Instead programmes appeared to be designed with a one-size-fits-all intention, focusing on the most cost-effective means of delivering information while also achieving the greatest outreach. Such conditions positioned teachers as passive learners, and these programmes often appeared to have little lasting impact on teacher practice and thinking. To change these conditions would require a significant shift in accepted approaches to teacher learning programmes. What opportunities, resources and time would be needed to effectively empower teachers to make decisions about what matters for their learning and how they will apply their learning within the reality of their personal teaching context? What would this mean for the facilitator of such a learning opportunity? What skills and behaviours would they need to be able to support teachers to work in this way? Would education sectors support the development of such a different approach to in-service teacher education?

Changing both the expected role of the teacher as learner and the conditions that were needed to promote such learning, would also have major implications for teacher participants in such programmes. I began to wonder if teachers would be willing to break away from traditional roles, take the risk to work differently and explore aspects of their practice not explicitly valued within existing educational approaches. Would teachers have the capacity to identify their learning needs? Would they be able to make decisions about the necessary context, learning objectives, learning experiences even the expertise they wished to draw on to enhance their personal learning needs? What strategies would support teachers to identify and articulate changes to personal professional thinking?

Given the prevailing educational agendas of systemic accountability, most notably to improve student learning outcomes, I was aware that my intentions to develop a programme that focused solely on teacher, rather than student, learning could be problematic. It may be especially problematic in terms of achieving system or sector support. Nonetheless, I decided to forge ahead, and I approached an education sector I had worked closely with for a number of years. I raised with them the prospect of developing a professional learning programme focusing less on the delivery of information about mandated policy implementation and more on the process of teacher learning. It was clear to me that the approach I was advocating could possibly be something that was at the very least challenging or at worst at odds with the intentions of this sector. Fortunately, the sector shared the goal of improving the quality of teaching and teacher learning and recognised the importance of exploring conditions that might enhance teacher confidence. The sector believed that such a process may also build personal professional capital and provide teachers with 'permission' to embrace a new sense of professionalism in their work. The sector therefore recognised the potential such a programme offered and equally saw a

value in conducting research to explore the conditions needed to enhance such learning.

With these objectives in mind, we set about to work collaboratively to provide a very different learning experience for teachers. It was timely because the sector had been planning to develop an in-service programme entitled *Leading Science in Schools (LSiS)* – a programme that would work to enable teachers to lead school-based change in science education. The programme had been proposed as a way of supporting teachers to value and build upon their knowledge and develop their expertise as leaders. In so doing, it was anticipated that the programme would assist participants to promote and lead meaningful science teaching and learning in their schools. The idea of such a programme provided a perfect vehicle for exploring conditions designed to enable teachers to work as self-directed learners. So, as both a professional learning facilitator and researcher, I found myself in a privileged position to design, implement and trial a range of alternative approaches to in-service teacher education all designed to foster meaningful teacher learning and challenge more traditional models of teacher learning.

What I learnt from this experience was that teachers not only have the capacity to think about and understand their practice in different ways, they are also capable of clearly articulating the deep thinking that drives their teaching. This information creates a new imperative for reconceptualizing teacher learning, supported by empirical results that reinforce the importance of enabling teachers to take ownership of their professional knowledge. However, to achieve such outcomes requires hard work from both teachers and those who seek to work alongside them to support their decision making and their investment in learning. Teachers must be willing to devote their time and their intellect to develop meaningful practice and develop a deeper understanding of their professional expertise.

When teachers are effectively supported to play a different role in their own professional growth and development, they have opportunity to experience, recognise and construct learning that is both personally and professionally rewarding. These findings matter for all teacher in-service programmes because this information demonstrates that we have only scratched the surface of what is possible in the area of teacher in-service education. We must begin to work in new ways, and this depends upon all educators sowing new seeds for potential growth, building on what we already know; teacher learning is complex, nuanced and contextual. Unfortunately, prevailing practice has failed to acknowledge the implications of this information and has chosen to frame teacher learning in terms of a common denominator rather than explore the rich insights that potentially grow from the diversity of teachers' contextual realities. We need to critically analyse why these limited frames have existed for so long to understand how we can move forward. The key lies in literature and research in the area of teacher learning, in particular, understanding the tensions that have for so long framed the role of teacher as learner.