

# PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: THEN AND NOW

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## ABSTRACT

Technological developments have altered pedagogies in classroom teaching but approaches to teacher professional development have remained largely unchanged. The purpose of this paper is to describe an evolving learning process that spans the last decade and draws from three different investigations into professional development. The author compares and contrasts the key findings from two independent studies on teacher professional development. One study was situated in a face-to-face action research context and the other in an online environment. The conclusions drawn about the nature of effective professional development in these independent studies show that whether in online or face-to-face contexts educational developers need to consider similar elements. A review of the literature indicated that further research was required to enhance the development, implementation and evaluation of online professional development opportunities to meet the in-time learning needs of teachers in sustainable ways. The author concludes by summing up the advantages and disadvantages of moving towards online teacher professional development and considers possible applications.

## KEYWORDS

Teacher professional development, informal learning, online learning

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade technological developments have altered pedagogies in classroom teaching. Even so, approaches to teacher professional development have remained largely unchanged and typically delivered in a face-to-face mode (Lloyd & Duncan 2010). Problematically, face-to-face professional development has often been delivered as one-off workshops off site, whereas best practice models recommend embedded learning tailored to meet individual needs in the workplace (Bolt 2003, 2009; Guskey 2000; Lloyd et al. 2005; Zepeda 2012). Problems with formal professional development programs are well documented but successful alternatives are less well publicized (Guskey 2000).

The purpose of this paper is to provide a quick overview of an evolving learning process which spans the last decade and draws from three different investigations into professional development. The author first investigated teacher professional development in the context of a funded action research Quality Teacher Program in Western Australia (Bolt 2003, 2007). On the other side of the country Lloyd et al. (2005) investigated teacher professional development in the use of information communication technologies. Subsequently, the author investigated professional learning in the workplace in a study conducted in three large dynamic organizations (Bolt 2009ab, 2010). The first two studies investigated teacher professional development in separate, diverse contexts and resulted in the conceptualization of similar yet different models of professional development. In an unrelated context, the author conducted the third study to investigate the relationship between professional development and organizational change and development by considering adult learning in the workplace as a result of formal programs, non-formal programs, informal learning and incidental learning. Key findings indicated that adults in the workplace learned as much if not more through informal learning, yet managers and human resource developers rarely planned for it (Bolt 2009ab, 2010).

This paper contributes to current knowledge and practice about professional development. By comparing and contrasting findings from the three studies, the author considers ways in which formal and informal learning could be blended through the use of information technology to enhance teacher professional development. This paper may be helpful to academic developers, educational leaders and human resource developers who are interested in knowing more about models of professional development suitable for either online, blended or face-to-face scenarios.

## 2. A TALE OF TWO STUDIES

The two studies undertaken independently in different locations, times and contexts arrived at remarkably similar conclusions (Bolt 2003; Lloyd et al. 2005). The Bolt (2003) study investigated the significant action learning experiences of teachers leading to professional growth. In the Bolt (2003) study ten case studies written by teachers participating in action research projects funded through the Quality Teacher Program over a one year period were analyzed and emergent themes identified. Although some of the participating teachers used technology in these projects the professional development focus was on action research in diverse situations. The Lloyd et al. (2005:1) study was commissioned by Queensland Society for Information Technology in Education (QSITE) “to inform its development of a position statement on professional development for teachers in the curricular use of ICT”. It was a small scale study in which conference delegates were surveyed and a range of educational leaders were interviewed (Lloyd et al. 2005). Interestingly, the resultant conceptualizations of professional development were similar (Bolt 2003, 2007; Lloyd et al. 2005). In Table 1 the similarities and differences between the two studies are compared and contrasted; then described in the following paragraphs.

Table 1. Comparison of key elements of two models of teacher professional development

<b>Framework for improving teaching and learning through action learning (Bolt 2003)</b>	<b>Elements of effective professional development (Lloyd et al. 2005)</b>
Context	Context
Collaboration	Community
Process (professional development + action learning)	Theory and practice
Endurance	Time
Professional growth (teaching and learning)	Personal growth (ICT)

### 2.1 Context

Context is an important element of professional development in both face-to-face and online professional development. In the Bolt (2003) study teachers appreciated opportunities to solve issues of concern to them, with peers in school-based action research groups supported by organizational structures and infrastructure to provide resources and time. By contrast, top-down approaches, teacher isolation, and lack of time were identified as constraining forces. In the Lloyd et al. (2005) study effective professional development was fostered in contexts in which learning was relevant, meaningful, practical and designed to meet immediate and ongoing needs (Lloyd & Duncan-Howell 2010). Action research was an important element in both studies and known to be an effective form of professional development (Bolt, 2003, 2007; Creswell 2008; Lloyd and Duncan-Howell, 2010; Zepeda, 2012). To sum up, an enabling context is important regardless of whether the professional development occurs in a linear program or an iterative online network.

### 2.2 Collaboration and Community

Whether in online, blended or face-to-face contexts there must be opportunities for participants to collaborate within communities of practice. Lloyd and Duncan-Howell (2010:70) described community as “collaborations during and following the professional development event and to ongoing connections and collaborations within local and extended communities”. Bolt (2003:140) noted “collaboration is the conduit through which professional growth flows and is fundamental to developing a learning organization ... and is vital to developing a learning community”. In both studies collaboration and community were interconnected and involved action and reflection. In the Bolt (2003) study collaboration and community typically occurred in school-based groups of teachers in face-to-face situations as they engaged with the iterative processes of action research. In the Lloyd et al. (2005) study collaboration and community typically occurred online. In either case, collaboration with others in communities led to participants’ engagement with professional development as a process rather than as an event.

## 2.3 Theory and Practice

Professional development must provide participants with opportunities to learn and subsequently transfer that learning into relevant workplace situations. In the Bolt (2003) study ‘theory’ was referred to as a broad range of professional development inputs in relation to school-based action research projects. Lloyd and Duncan-Howell (2010) describe theory and practice in ways consistent with action research – iterative, linked to action and reflection, community, context and growth. Action research supports transfer of learning (Caffarella, 2002).

## 2.4 Just-in-time and Sustainable-Over-Time

Time is one major constraining force acting against successful implementation of professional development programs. Action research is timely, focusing on real life immediate problem-based issues. One of the key success factors identified in the Bolt (2003) study was ‘endurance’ – supported by the preceding elements of effective professional development participants sustained their engagement with school-based action research projects over a one year period to achieve their goals and answer personally relevant questions. Teachers directed their own learning and scheduled relevant associated action and reflection (Bolt, 2003). The professional development described in Bolt (2003) is consistent with Lloyd and Duncan-Howell’s (2010:70) “dual understandings of time” and depiction of effective professional development. Lloyd and Duncan-Howell (2010) link ‘in-time’ learning with practice and ‘over-time’ to theory as a result of reflection.

## 2.5 Growth and Development

In the Bolt (2003:155) study, analysis of ten cases identified “professional growth was evidenced by change at the classroom level in teachers’ pedagogy and student outcomes”. Lloyd and Duncan-Howell (2010) note the importance of increased personal and corporate knowledge and the ability of online communities to connect participants with ‘experts’ beyond their immediate situation.

Lloyd and Duncan-Howell (2010) refer to online professional development metaphorically, depicting it as a Celtic knot rather than traditionally as a ‘journey’. Poignantly, they note that if professional development is a journey then for teachers in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century “it is unlikely there is a destination” (Lloyd and Duncan-Howell 2010:73). Recent rapid technological changes have shortened the shelf life of knowledge, resulting in dynamic environments and increasing the need for lifelong learning, responsibly shared by individuals and organizations (Burns 2002). Consequently, there is increased need to learn informally ‘on-the-go’.

## 3. THIRD STUDY SHOWS IMPORTANCE OF INFORMAL LEARNING

In the previous two studies participants were teachers and educational administrators. In the third study participants were adult learners in the workplace many of whom were providers of training and professional development. Data were collected through 70 semi-structured interviews and 210 responses to a 23 question survey. Overall, participants in this study rated their personal informal learning as highly effective. By contrast, managers and human resource developers typically planned formal programs without providing structures to support informal learning (Bolt 2009). Four of the ten key recommendations from the Bolt (2009:214) study were to “integrate informal learning into training and development programs and work practices”, “enhance managers’ understandings of different types of learning and how they can most effectively be used in different situations”, “include transfer of learning strategies” and “adopt a hybrid approach that meets individual and organizational needs”. In this study participation in informal learning included *inductions, mentoring, networking, attending meetings, Internet searches, work shadowing, reading and online learning* (Bolt 2009: 136, 154).

Online learning environments can support informal learning by facilitating collaboration and reflective practices, thus, enabling participants to construct knowledge and transfer learning through, for example; journaling, conversing asynchronously and synchronously, sharing audio and video (Zepeda 2012; Zygouris-Coe and Swan 2010). Lloyd and Duncan-Howell (2010) predict that in the future professional development will occur as self-directed individuals fluidly move in and out of online communities of practice; learning from each other just-in-time. So, if there is a destination – are we there yet?

## 4. CONCLUSION

A brief overview of literature on professional development indicates we are not there yet (Zepeda 2012). Online resources have the potential to be used flexibly and widely to support teacher professional development (Zygouris-Coe and Swan 2010). An advantage of online professional development is that it can facilitate both formal and informal learning which can be accessed just-in-time and sustained over-time. It allows teachers to form communities of practice and collaborate with people beyond their face-to-face associations in both time and space. A significant point raised in this paper is that elements characteristic of effective professional development are similar for face-to-face and online situations (Bolt 2003; Lloyd et al. 2005). However managers and developers in some large organizations do not plan for informal learning to occur (Bolt 2009). Managers and developers face challenges due to rapid changes in technology and participants' ability to use it. Also, it is challenging to design, implement, maintain and assess the effectiveness of online professional development programs (Zygouris-Coe and Swan 2010). Even so, the fast paced dynamic environment of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century demands agile alternatives to traditional methods. As workforce dynamics change and the proportion of technologically savvy staff increases there will be greater demand for just-in-time flexible learning opportunities. As more teachers use technology to teach their students, the need to provide them with online professional development will increase also. This paper identifies the need for development of informal online professional development opportunities to support knowledge creation and transfer of learning in a range of settings. Such developments would require evaluation and dissemination of findings to the broader academic and educational community.

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