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## Developing a Professional Learning Culture

### Commitment to growth and development

#### KEY IDEAS

- Effective language teachers are lifelong learners
- Involvement in a professional learning culture is a commitment to develop professionally and personally

## Lifelong learners

A professional learning culture is one in which we, as educators, are committed to our own growth and development as professionals. It grows out of our deep professional desire to continue to develop our knowledge and practice and to maximise opportunities for learning. Such a culture is central to effective, high quality teaching. It means that, as educators, we see ourselves, and are seen by others, as lifelong learners both of the languages and cultures we teach and of teaching itself. As education is a changing field, we need to continue to keep up to date with new developments. Moreover, our professional drive is to continue to deepen and broaden our knowledge of our chosen field through ongoing learning throughout our careers and beyond.

# Creating a culture of professional learning

## KEY IDEAS

- A professional learning culture involves developing a deep and ongoing awareness of the practices and processes of teaching and learning
- A professional learning culture is an ongoing process of learning from, and reflecting on, a personal and professional stance, including understandings, ideas and experiences

Learning cultures can be considered in a range of ways, including the following.

- A learning culture has often been considered in terms of the environment and experiences created by teachers for students. A learning culture is one in which experiences are structured in such a way that students have opportunities to investigate, explore and take risks in developing new ideas and insights.
- A professional learning culture has often been thought of as something that is a feature of schools and of school leadership. In this sense a professional learning culture is the promotion of professional learning as a normal and valuable part of teachers' work and the collaborative development process and goals for professional learning. In addition, the culture supports, resources and rewards professional learning (Crowther, Kaagan, Ferguson & Hann, 2002).

While both of these views have elements of a professional learning culture they present the learning culture as something that is (or ought to be) created to support the learning of others. This, however, misses a crucial point about the nature of cultures, which is that they are something in which people participate not something which is done to them. Teachers create a culture of professional learning through their own actions.

## Contexts of a professional learning culture

### KEY IDEAS

- The focus of a learning culture is on learning in diverse contexts: teacher learning, student learning, community learning
- Professional learning happens in a range of different ways

A professional learning culture is one which engages with learning in many different contexts. It is not simply the students' learning or an individual teacher's learning, but rather it is a commitment to learning as a valued activity in its own right. Creating a culture of learning for students is an important part of this work, as is having a supportive environment in which to develop as a professional, however nothing can create a professional learning culture if this is not found in the practice of teachers themselves and their disposition to developing their professional learning.

A professional learning culture involves more than regular participation in organised learning activities, some of which are short, one-off seminars. It requires active engagement with ideas and issues and critical reflection of knowledge and practice. In engaging this way, teachers take an active responsibility to understand, develop and experiment with aspects of their professional work. Teachers are in this sense observers and analysers of what is occurring in their schools, classrooms and communities and not just planners and deliverers of a curriculum.



Effective teaching is informed by personal knowledge, trial and error, reflection on practice, and conversations with colleagues.

To be a teacher means to observe students and study classroom interactions, to explore a variety of effective ways of teaching, and to build conceptual frameworks that can guide one's work.

(Fischer, 2001:29)



Observing and analysing add a critical dimension to teaching practice which seeks to continually experiment with and develop what happens in the process of teaching and learning in order to expand the opportunities for both teacher and learners. This in turn involves the development of an 'investigative stance'. In discussing the idea of an investigative stance Crichton notes:

“Teaching necessarily involves being alert to what is going on in the classroom, noticing developments and changes, attending to emergent needs, comparing achievements at one point in time with what has happened before and what might happen after, reflecting on teaching practice and assessment, evaluating activities and plans, developing and drawing on curriculums, and the host of other activities that contribute to effective teaching practice. Of course these activities do not happen in isolation; they inform each other through the lesson, the day, the week, and over the longer term, acknowledging the perspectives and changing needs of students, teachers and members of the broader school community.”  
(Crichton, 2007:8)

An investigative stance is not something which teachers add to their practice. It is rather a way of doing what teachers regularly do in more systematic ways (Liddicoat & Jansen, 1998). In particular, an investigative stance involves:

- an orientation to noticing, documenting, and making sense of the actions of teachers and learners
- an ongoing interest in using information about the classroom to develop language teaching and learning practice.

This means more than keeping up-to-date with curriculum initiatives and planning units of work. Most teachers devote time to thinking about and developing their curriculum and many professional learning activities are focused on developing better understandings of curriculum documents. These activities focus on the intended curriculum (what is going to be taught). Less attention is often paid to important aspects of teaching work such as the implemented curriculum (what teachers actually teach) and to the attained curriculum (what students learn) (Marzano, 2003). Similarly, less attention is devoted to the *processes* of teaching, learning, assessment and evaluation or to questioning one's understanding of the basic constructs of the discipline, such as language, culture, learning and the intercultural.

As part of a culture of professional learning, teachers need an ongoing engagement with questions such as the following.

- What are my goals and values as a teacher of languages?
- What do I want each student to learn?
- How do I understand the constructs that I am teaching and how is this reflected in what I teach?
- How will I develop experiences and activities which promote this learning?
- How will I know when each student has learned it?
- How will I respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning?

## Collaborating for a professional learning culture

### KEY IDEA

- A professional learning culture is based on dialogue with others, including students, peers, mentors and professional networks

While a professional learning culture is characterised by the engagement of individual teachers in an ongoing process of learning, it does not mean that teachers learn in isolation from others. A culture is a shared enterprise and professional learning is at its most effective when it is done collaboratively. This means that a professional learning culture requires a communal dimension in which professional learning is both a formal and an informal process of sharing expertise and experiences as a professional learning community.

A professional learning community involves teachers working collaboratively together to identify and work with the issues and challenges raised by teaching and learning in individual or shared contexts. Such collaboration involves dialogue about issues and problems related to teaching and learning and to students' progress. Language teachers often work in isolation from other teachers of the same subject, and in some cases in isolation from other teachers in the school. For this reason, professional learning communities are vital. A professional learning community means developing a collaborative approach to, and mutual support for, personal learning by providing 'opportunities to learn that (involve) collaboration, dialogue, reflection, inquiry and leadership' (Lambert, 1998:xi). For language teachers, networks are therefore an important part of the professional learning culture. Such networks can be constructed in various ways, connecting:

- teachers within a school community across disciplines
- teachers of the same language
- teachers of diverse languages
- teachers at different levels of schooling
- teachers at the same level of schooling.

Each such network allows for different possibilities of dialogue and collaboration. Networks within a school facilitate dialogue and exchange about specific groups of learners and the ways in which teaching and learning happen at other times and in other subjects giving a deeper understanding of students' experiences of schooling. Language specific networks contribute to professional learning which is focused on the particularities of individual languages. Such networks are often made up of teachers at different levels of schooling and facilitate exchange about what happens at different stages in a learner's progression through language learning. Networks among teachers at the same level of schooling support teachers in working with the cognitive, social and developmental issues which are relevant to their area of work. Such networks typically include teachers from different languages and enrich the possible perspectives that teachers of any particular language bring to their reflection and investigation. A rich professional learning culture would allow opportunities for interactions with various different configurations of teachers. Learning communities can be developed using communication technologies that can include teachers who are in remote locations, often isolated from others teaching in their language.

A professional learning culture is not, however, simply a set of networks of teachers. It is fundamentally a dialogue about curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment which occurs among all educators who professionally contribute to developing understanding and reflection. A professional learning culture may include a mentoring relationship between a beginning teacher and a more experienced teacher. In this case, the relationship is not a simple 'master-apprentice' relationship, as learning in such contexts is a two-way process in which the knowledge and

experiences of the less experienced teacher provide possibilities for learning for the more experienced teacher as well. A professional learning culture also involves dialogue with students – a process of coming to understand their perspectives on, and experiences of, education – to develop an understanding of their needs, expectations and interests and of what it is that they bring to their classroom learning.

In developing a professional learning culture it is important to have a clear sense of one's own learning needs and professional standards, such as the AFMLTA's *Professional standards for accomplished teaching of languages and cultures* (AFMLTA, 2005) which are useful for working towards such a sense. These standards are designed to describe *accomplished* teachers of languages and cultures. They reflect an ideal to which teachers should aspire. Teachers can work with them to understand and to develop their own professional stance and practices. These standards are intended to benefit teachers at all levels of schooling as signposts for ongoing professional learning and as a resource for evaluating their own knowledge and practice as they reflect on their work as teachers (Liddicoat, 2006).

Working with professional standards enables all of us, as educators, to consider our own practice and professional capabilities in a critical way. Using such a document can help target professional learning, identify personal learning goals and develop personalised learning plans. The AFMLTA standards are accompanied by reflection questions which are designed for teachers to use in considering how each standard applies to their own professional context and to identify areas for future learning. They also have language specific annotations for some of the more commonly taught languages which can be used for more detailed focus on aspects of professional knowledge and practice.

### **Questions for reflection**

- 1 How could you increase your opportunities for involvement in a learning community either within or outside your school?
- 2 What issues do you face in your professional practice which an investigative stance could help you understand and change?
- 3 How do you involve parents and members of the school community in developing and monitoring a learning culture?
- 4 What do the AFMLTA professional standards for languages teaching contribute to your understanding of your professional learning needs?